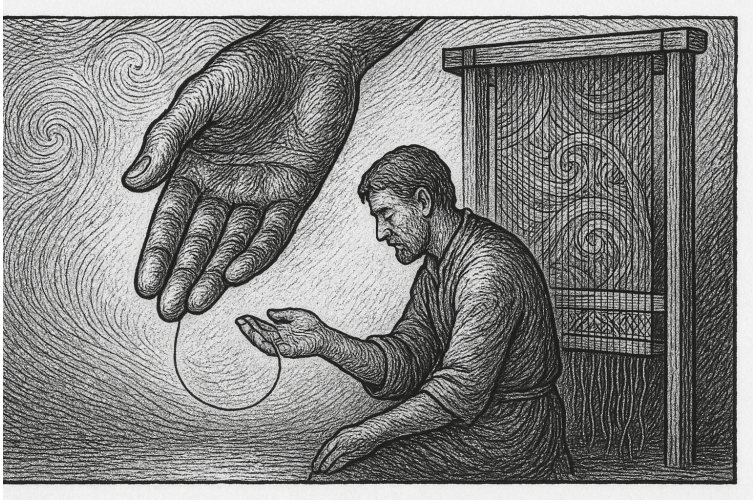
The Weavers of Time



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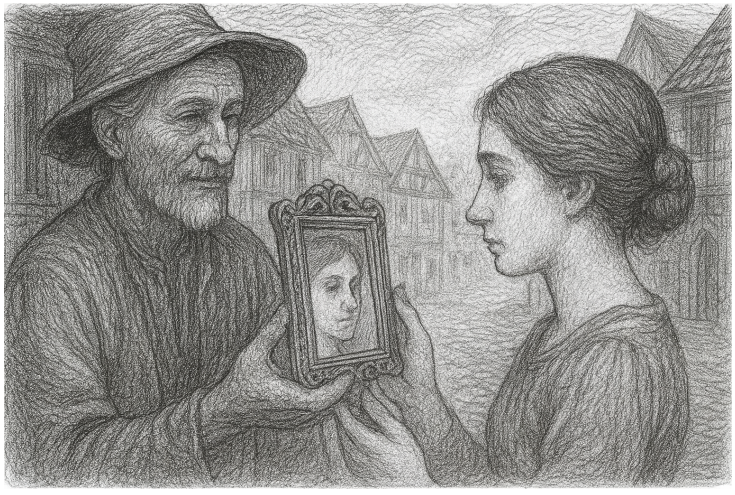


The Mirror Merchant

by Curtis Sergeant

The Weavers of Time 3
Chapter 1: The City of Weavers 3
Chapter 2: The Counsel of the Wise 8
Chapter 3: The Burden of the Threadsmith 12
Chapter 4: Whispers of the Weaver 17
Chapter 5: The Choice Begins 22
Chapter 6: Into the Loom's Heart 31
Chapter 7: The Choice 36
Chapter 8: The Tear Repaired 45
Chapter 9: The Unveiling 53
Chapter 10: A New Calling 61
Epilogue 70
The Mirror Merchant 73
Prologue: The Craftsman's Secret 73
Chapter 1: The Pilgrim's Purchase 75
Chapter 2: The Lady of Appearances 77
Chapter 3: The Merchant Tested 79
Chapter 4: The Prince's Command 81
Chapter 5: The Flawless Glass 83
Chapter 6: The Court Divided 85
Chapter 7: The Merchant's Trial 87
Chapter 8: The Prince in the Night 90
Chapter 9: The Breaking 92
Chapter 10: The Price of Truth 94
Epilogue: The Shard 96

The Weavers of Time

Chapter 1: The City of Weavers

The city was alive with the sound of looms.
Day and night, their wooden frames clicked and hummed, a steady heartbeat echoing through the streets. From the moment a child could steady their hands, a spindle was placed within their grasp. Thread was given—bright or dim, coarse or fine—and each life was measured by how faithfully it was woven into the Tapestry.

To walk through the marketplace was to see walls lined with patterns, squares of destiny stretching high as towers. Some were radiant, shimmering with gold strands that caught the sun. Others were pale and uneven, patched where the thread had broken or strayed. Yet all were joined at their edges, bound to one another, forming the vast cloth draping across the city's heart. The citizens often stood before it in reverence, gazing at what they could see of its design, proud or ashamed of their portion.

In the shadow of the Tapestry's great hall lived a threadsmith named Corin. His shop was small, tucked into a crooked street where the dust gathered thicker than the coins in his purse. Corin was not known for grand designs; he did not add new colors to the weave or boast of his own patterns. Instead, he worked with frayed ends. Men and women came to him when their threads snapped or tangled, when their squares grew ragged with error. He spliced broken strands back into place with careful fingers, coaxing them through the loom until they held again.

It was honest work, though humble. Few remembered his name after their cloth was mended. Corin himself seldom

lingered before his own weaving. His square was plain—no brilliance of color, no remarkable design. He told himself it was enough, but he often wondered in quiet hours: Did the Tapestry mean anything at all? From up close, it seemed only a riot of shapes, knots crossing knots, like chaos made visible.

Now and then, an old rumor returned to him. Some said that beyond the city walls, where no loom could be heard, there dwelled an Unseen Weaver. They whispered that the Tapestry was not merely the sum of a thousand imperfect hands, but a design far older, guided by one who never erred. Most scoffed at the notion. "Our threads are our own," they said. "What pattern could another impose upon us but to steal our freedom?" And so the rumor lingered, like smoke in the rafters, half-believed and soon forgotten.

Yet Corin, when no one watched, would sometimes step back from his bench and gaze at the expanse of cloth. He would trace the jagged courses of thread with his eyes, the way they seemed to wander without reason, only to meet again at some hidden point. He could not say why, but at times it felt less like chaos and more like something unfinished—an image waiting to be revealed.

On the morning the summons came, Corin was bent over a broken spindle, oiling its wheel. The bell at his door rang, sharp against the drone of the looms. He looked up to see a boy breathless from running, clutching a strip of crimson thread in his hand.

"The council calls for you," the boy gasped. "A tear has opened in the Tapestry. And they say… only you can mend it."

Corin wiped his hands on his apron and studied the boy's trembling fingers. The crimson strand he held was frayed, as if it had been torn loose by force. Even in the dim light of the shop, the thread seemed to pulse with urgency.

"The council calls for me?" Corin asked slowly, as though he had misheard.

The boy nodded. "They say the Tapestry is wounded. A gap has opened. Threads are pulling free like a floodgate loosed. They tried to mend it, but—" He glanced at the ragged cord in his hand. "It will not hold."

Corin's first thought was that someone else should go. There were master-weavers more skilled than he, artisans whose names were etched in the city's records. He was a mender of minor faults, not a savior of the whole. Yet the boy's eyes clung to him with desperate expectation, as if Corin alone might quiet the panic that now spread through Loomvale.

He set down the spindle he had been oiling, his heart tightening. "Show me," he said.

The streets that led to the Tapestry Hall were crowded. Citizens pressed forward in anxious knots, craning to see the commotion. Whispers chased through the air: *It has never torn before… Is it a sign of judgment? What if the whole cloth unravels?*

Corin kept his gaze low, following the boy until they reached the great archway. The hall was cavernous, its vaulted ceiling lost in shadows. And there, stretched across the far wall, was the Tapestry—vaster than any memory could hold, its patterns gleaming in the lantern light.

But Corin's eyes found the wound.

It yawned like a mouth, jagged and raw, threads snapping outward as though some unseen hand had clawed them apart. The tear ran not just across one square, but through many, dragging noble and common strands alike into ruin. Weavers knelt before it, their looms clattering in frantic effort, but every stitch they added unraveled as soon as it touched the breach.

The council stood nearby, robed and severe. When Corin entered, they turned as one.

"You are the threadsmith," the eldest declared. "You mend what others cannot. You will repair this."

Corin felt the weight of every eye in the hall. He approached slowly, palms damp. The air around the wound seemed alive, a faint tremor running through the threads as if they resisted the hands that sought to bind them. He reached for the crimson strand the boy had carried, meaning to tie it back into place.

The thread recoiled.

Corin stumbled back. It was not possible—but he had felt it as clearly as flesh flinching from pain.

Murmurs swelled behind him. The council's voices rose, sharp with accusation. "You must press harder! The Tapestry must be whole. If you fail, the city itself may fray!"

Corin's thoughts churned. How could he mend what refused his touch? His trade was built on steady fingers and patience, but this was different—this was alive, as though the cloth itself would not yield to human will.

He turned, meaning to speak, but his words caught in his throat. A figure stood watching in the back of the hall, half veiled by shadow. Cloaked in simple gray, face lined yet calm, the stranger's eyes met Corin's across the distance. And in that steady gaze, Corin felt a strange assurance—like a hand laid on a trembling shoulder.

Then the moment was gone. A councilor seized Corin's arm, thrusting a bundle of threads toward him. "Do your work, threadsmith!"

Corin swallowed hard. He touched the torn edges again, but already he knew: no craft of his could close this wound.

And the mender of threads felt utterly unmade for the first time in his life.

Chapter 2: The Counsel of the Wise

The council chamber smelled of ink and burning wax. Scrolls lay stacked in heavy towers, each tied with ribbons of differing hue, each a record of law, decree, or custom. The councilors moved among them with restless energy, like bees among hives, voices rising as the crack in the Tapestry pulsed in all their minds.

Corin stood at the room's edge, the summons still echoing in his bones. He had been given no chance to protest before a servant pressed him into the chamber, where the elders now debated as if truth itself were spun from their tongues.

"The fault lies with weak weaving," declared one, a tall man with shoulders broad as beams. His robe was dyed in the deep green of the guild of order. "If the people were stricter, if their threads were tested before being added, such failures would not occur." He slammed his palm upon a scroll as if it were a judgment. "We must impose firmer rules. Punish mistakes. Only purity will hold."

Another, thin and severe, shook her head. Her hair was bound with gold wire, gleaming in the lamplight. "No. The fault lies in dull color. The people weave with common dye, and so the cloth weakens. The Tapestry would blaze with strength if we demanded richer hues and rarer shades. Let us cast out the drab threads and weave only with brilliance."

A third councilor stroked his beard, voice deep as a drum. "Cut away the torn portion altogether. Sacrifice the weak that the rest may stand. A smaller Tapestry whole is better than a grand one in tatters."

Each voice grew louder, clashing, overlapping, as if their words could bind what their hands could not.

Corin pressed his fingers together. He had spent his life with thread and loom, and he knew the folly in their proposals. A cloth did not grow stronger by punishing its frays, painting it with brighter dye, or cutting away every flaw. Still, who was he to speak against them? He was a craftsman of alleys, not a master of councils.

At last, the eldest of them all raised his staff, carved with the symbol of the shuttle and spindle. Silence fell. His eyes, clouded with age, turned upon Corin.

"You are the threadsmith," he said, his voice a rasp yet firm. "These are words, but you have hands. Tell us, how will you mend what has broken?"

Corin's mouth was dry. He thought of the tear, the way it had recoiled from his touch. He thought of the cloaked figure in the shadows, the calm gaze that had steadied him for one heartbeat. Slowly, he shook his head.

"I do not know," he admitted.

The chamber erupted. Some shouted that he was unfit, others that he withheld his skill out of pride. One called for his banishment, another for his replacement. Only the eldest watched him without anger, though his gaze was heavy with sorrow.

"Then go back to the Tapestry," the elder said. "Try again. We can do nothing until it is mended. And you—whether ready or not—must try."

When Corin returned, the hall of the Tapestry was dim. The crowd had thinned, but clusters of citizens lingered, whispering, watching the jagged gap. The looms of the council's chosen weavers stood abandoned, their half-woven patches unraveling into dust.

Corin approached alone. His hands shook as he drew fresh thread from his pouch—simple flax, the kind he used for mending children's garments. He set the spindle to spin, coaxing the fiber into line, and reached for the torn edge.

The threads shivered.

Again, that strange resistance coursed through them, as though the cloth itself knew him, judged him, and refused him. He pulled harder, weaving, pressing, and tying knots with all the patience he had ever learned. For a moment, the breach seemed to narrow.

But then, with a sound like ripping sail, the cloth tore wider.

Gasps rose from the watchers. Corin staggered back, shame flooding him. His patching had not healed but harmed. His skill was nothing here.

A voice spoke from the shadows. "You cannot weave what was never yours to guide."

Corin turned sharply. The cloaked figure had stepped nearer, face lined with years, eyes deep with a calm that unsettled and steadied all at once. His hands were empty, yet they seemed more sure than the finest loom.

"Who are you?" Corin whispered.

The man inclined his head. “A traveler. One who has seen the Weaver’s hand.”

“The Weaver?” Corin repeated. The word tasted like rumor and myth.

The traveler’s gaze did not waver. “This Tapestry is not held by you, your council, or any of the weavers of this city. It is guided by One you cannot see. And until you yield your thread into His hand, no tear will ever truly mend.”

Corin’s breath caught. The words stirred something buried deep within him—a memory, or perhaps only a longing—that the patterns might mean more than chaos, that the threads might sing of more than human striving.

But before he could answer, the councilors strode back into the hall, their robes sweeping the floor. The traveler stepped into shadow once more, vanishing as though he had never been.

The eldest elder raised his staff. “Threadsmith! Report. Has the tear been mended?”

Corin lowered his eyes. “No, my lord. It has grown worse.”

The staff struck the floor like a gavel. “Then you will try again, and again, until it is whole. The Tapestry cannot fail. Do you understand?”

Corin nodded faintly. But within his chest, another voice lingered—steady, insistent—telling him that perhaps the Tapestry had never been theirs to hold in the first place..

Chapter 3: The Burden of the Threadsmith

The next day dawned with the sky dim as tarnished metal. A hush had settled over Loomvale, the usual chorus of looms muted, their rhythms broken. People gathered in uneasy knots across the market square, heads bent close, voices low.

“The Tapestry is sick,” one woman murmured, clutching her child as if thread could slip from his skin.

“It is judgment,” another said grimly. “Our weaving has grown crooked. Now the cloth unravels in wrath.”

Others shook their heads. “It is the threadsmith’s fault. He touched the wound, and it worsened. Who else bears the blame?”

At first, Corin heard these whispers only faintly, drifting like smoke through the streets. But as the hours lengthened, they thickened into accusation. Wherever he walked, gazes followed him—some fearful, some bitter, all restless. His neighbors, once glad for his steady hands, now pulled their shutters closed when he passed. Children were called indoors. Even the merchants who once relied on his repairs pretended not to see him.

By evening, he could not escape the weight of their suspicion.

He retreated to his shop, though it offered little comfort. Tools lay scattered on the bench where he had left them: spindles, needles, combs. They seemed suddenly small, laughably weak against the vast wound in the Tapestry. Corin set his hands upon them, but his fingers shook so violently he could not thread a needle’s eye.

He looked to the corner where his own weaving stood—a modest square, unremarkable, woven in plain flax and a few muted dyes. For years, he had told himself it was enough. He had not sought brilliance, only faithfulness. But now, staring at it, he saw flaws he had overlooked: knots tied in haste, uneven tension where his patience had waned. Worse still, along the lower edge, threads were loosening, curling away from the pattern like roots pulled from dry earth.

Corin's breath caught. His own life was unraveling.

He gripped the frame as if to hold it fast, but the more tightly he clutched, the more threads seemed to slip free. A sob rose unbidden in his throat. He had mended countless others' cloth, yet could not even hold his own together.

A knock startled him. It was not the sharp rap of council summons, nor the eager tapping of customers. It was soft, deliberate.

He opened the door to find the cloaked traveler.

The man's face was calm, lined with years yet strong with a quiet peace. His eyes, dark as ink, held Corin as surely as a loom holds thread.

"You have felt the burden," the traveler said. It was not a question.

Corin's voice cracked. "The city blames me. And perhaps they are right. I touched the wound, and it grew worse. My hands are not enough."

"No hands are enough," the traveler answered gently. "That is the truth you are learning. No thread, however skillful,

can secure the Tapestry when it is held only by human grasp."

Corin stepped back, shaking his head. "But if not us, then who? It is all we have ever known—our looms, our weaving, our portion of the cloth. If we surrender that, what remains?"

The traveler's gaze softened. "What remains is what has always been: the Weaver's hand. You see only knots and tangles, and so you despair. But He sees the design, and in His design nothing is wasted—not even the threads that fray."

The words struck something deep within Corin, a longing he had never dared name. Could it be true that even his faltering weave might serve a purpose beyond his skill? He wanted to believe. Yet fear clung to him like dust.

Before he could answer, angry voices rose outside. A knot of townsfolk approached, their torches flickering in the dusk.

"Threadsmith!" one cried. "Come forth!"

Corin stiffened. The traveler placed a steady hand upon his shoulder. "Do not fear truth, even when anger surrounds it," he murmured, then slipped silently into the alley shadows.

The townsfolk crowded before the shop. Their faces were lined with worry, some with scorn.

"You touched the Tapestry," a man accused. "Since then, the tear spreads like rot."

“You will mend it,” another insisted, jabbing a finger at him. “If not, we will cast you out. Better one thread cut than the whole cloth destroyed.”

Corin’s knees trembled. He opened his mouth, but no words came. What could he say—that he had tried and failed? That the Tapestry itself recoiled from his hands? The council had commanded silence, and the people demanded answers.

At last, he spoke, voice barely above a whisper. “I cannot mend it.”

A stunned silence followed. Then shouts erupted. Some cursed him, others wailed in despair. A stone struck the wall beside his door. Corin shrank back, heart pounding.

But before the crowd could surge closer, the elder councilor appeared, his staff lifted high. His voice cut through the din.

“Enough! The threadsmith will continue his work. He has no choice. The Tapestry must hold.”

The people hesitated, cowed by the staff’s authority. Slowly, grudgingly, they dispersed into the night, their mutters fading into the alleys.

Corin sagged against the doorframe, exhausted.

The elder fixed him with a gaze heavy as stone. “Do not fail again,” he said. “The fate of Loomvale hangs by your thread.”

Then he turned, leaving Corin alone in the dark.

That night Corin could not sleep. He sat before his own weaving, watching the loosened strands creep further from their place. He tried repeatedly to press them back, but each effort failed. His hands, once steady, now shook with every movement.

At last, he dropped the spindle, his strength spent. Heavy and undeniable, the truth pressed upon him: his life, like the Tapestry, could not be held together by his own will.

He bowed his head into his hands. For the first time, a prayer rose from his lips—not to the council or his own skill, but to the One he did not know, the Weaver whispered only in rumor.

"If You are there… if You are real… then take this thread. For I cannot hold it any longer."

The words hung trembling in the silence. No answer came, no vision, no miracle—only the quiet creak of the loom.

Yet somewhere deep within, like the faintest tug on a hidden cord, Corin felt the burden shift. Just enough to draw breath again. Just enough to hope.

Chapter 4: Whispers of the Weaver

The morning came gray and heavy, the looms of the city strangely hushed. Corin left his shop early, hoping to walk unseen. His mind was thick with the memory of last night's prayer—the first honest surrender he had ever spoken aloud. Yet doubt pressed in as quickly as the dawn mist. Had anyone heard? Or had he only muttered into emptiness?

He kept to the narrow alleys, weaving through the city's spine of streets until the walls of the Tapestry Hall rose before him once more. Even from outside, he could sense it: the wound had spread. Threads now dangled loose from high above, drifting like cobwebs across the air. The people in the square craned their necks, fear thick in their voices.

"There will be nothing left to pass to our children."

"It is the end of all weaving."

Corin turned to slip away before the council caught sight of him. But a voice halted him.

"You will not find healing there."

The traveler stood at the edge of the crowd, cloak draped in simple folds, eyes calm as still water. His presence seemed both ordinary and arresting, as if he belonged to the very air yet carried a weight beyond it.

Corin swallowed. "Then where? If the Tapestry fails, the city fails. They expect me to mend it."

"They expect what no hand can accomplish," the traveler replied. "But there is another way. Walk with me."

They left the square, winding through streets less traveled. The city thinned, houses giving way to open ground. Beyond the walls stretched the hills—green slopes scattered with wildflowers, untouched by looms. The air smelled cleaner here, freed from the dust of spinning halls.

Corin felt strangely exposed. Few ever left the city. To abandon its looms, even briefly, was frowned upon, for the Tapestry required constant tending. He glanced back uneasily, but the traveler's steady pace urged him forward.

At last they came to a rise where the land fell away in a broad view. The city lay below, its walls wrapped around the Tapestry Hall like a clenched fist. And across its center, vast and unmistakable, the wound yawned wider than ever. From above, the threads looked like rivers cut by drought, twisting, splitting, failing to meet.

Corin's heart sank. "It is worse than I feared."

"Look again," the traveler said quietly.

Corin narrowed his eyes. At first, he saw only chaos—lines broken, knots snarled, dye faded. But as he stepped back, something shifted. The tangle began to form shapes, faint but real: the curve of a hill, the outline of a tree, the sweep of light across water. What had seemed random began, from this vantage, to resemble an image—unfinished, yes, but strangely alive.

Corin gasped. "How can this be? From below, it is ruined. From here, it is… it is almost beautiful."

The traveler nodded. "That is the Weaver's work. He takes what you call a mistake, what you call a failure, and turns it into design. But only if the threads are yielded to Him."

Corin's voice faltered. "And if they are not?"

The traveler's eyes held his with sorrow. "Then they remain tangled. A knot without purpose. A thread without end."

Corin looked back at the faint pattern below, hope stirring with dread. "If this is true… why do so few speak of it? Why does the council not tell us?"

"Because the council believes the cloth is theirs," the traveler said. "They see only what their hands can shape. To yield is to confess weakness. And pride does not yield."

The words pierced Corin. He thought of his own weaving, the threads unraveling in his shop. Pride had told him he could hold it together. Only when he confessed his weakness had he felt the faint relief of surrender.

Still, the question burned. "Why me? Why should I be the one called to face the tear?"

The traveler's gaze softened. "Because the Weaver delights in using the humble. Those who know their weakness become vessels for His strength. The proud boast of their threads; the surrendered discover His pattern."

Corin lowered his head, torn between longing and fear. "If I yield my thread… will the Weaver mend the Tapestry?"

The traveler's voice was gentle. "Yield, and you will see. But know this: to place your thread in His hand is to lose the weaving you thought was yours. The life you clung to will not remain unchanged."

Corin trembled. Part of him longed for release from the burden, to see the Tapestry whole again. Yet another part

recoiled at the thought of losing control, of surrendering what little was his. His thread was plain, yes, but it was his.

The traveler laid a hand upon his shoulder. “You prayed last night, did you not?”

Corin’s breath caught. “How do you know?”

“Because the Weaver heard.”

The words rang in him like struck metal. For a moment, silence wrapped the hillside, broken only by the whisper of wind through grass.

Corin closed his eyes. The weight of the city’s blame, the unraveling of his own life, the ache of futility—all pressed upon him. Yet beneath it ran a new current, faint but sure, like water trickling through stone.

When he opened his eyes again, the traveler was watching him with quiet expectation.

“I do not know if I am strong enough,” Corin admitted.

The traveler’s lips curved in a small smile. “Strength is not what is asked. Only surrender.”

They descended the hill as the sun dipped low, shadows stretching across the fields. The city’s walls loomed once more, harsh against the fading light. The sound of looms returned, uneven, frantic, as if the weavers sought to drown their fear with labor.

At the gate, the traveler paused. “The council will summon you again. When they do, remember what you have seen.

The tear is not yours to mend, but the Weaver's. Give Him your thread, and He will make of it what you cannot."

Before Corin could speak, the man turned down a narrow path, vanishing into the dusk.

Corin stood at the gate long after he was gone. The city pressed at his back, the wound of the Tapestry waiting in its hall. But in his mind, he still saw the faint outline of a pattern—tree, hill, light—shaping itself from what he had once called ruin.

For the first time, the thought stirred in him: perhaps the Tapestry was not ending at all. Perhaps it was only beginning.

Chapter 5: The Choice Begins

The summons came before the sun had cleared the eastern roofs. A council runner pounded Corin's door with the hilt of a staff and left a sealed strip of parchment wedged in the latch. The wax bore the mark of the shuttle and spindle.

You will present yourself at once in the Hall. The breach widens. You will mend it under witness.

Corin held the seal in his palm until the wax warmed. His own weaving in the corner had slipped again in the night—two more threads loosening against his best attempts to hold them. He had lain awake with the traveler's words turning in him like a hidden wheel: *Strength is not what is asked. Only surrender.*

He lifted his spindle. The fibers clung to his fingers, soft and stubborn. He tied his working thread around his wrist as he had done since boyhood—a habit to keep the length ready. Then he stopped. He untied it, letting the thread fall free.

"Not mine," he whispered, though only the stillness heard.

He left the shop.

The square swelled with people. They had not dispersed since yesterday; fear had settled into vigilance. Mothers clutched children as if thread might be stolen from their chests. Young men set their jaws and watched the Hall doors with the hunger of those eager to blame. Guild banners clustered along the steps—green for order, gold for dye, blue for measure. The council stood beneath them, robes arranged like a wall.

When Corin mounted the steps, the elder raised his staff. “The Tapestry suffers. You will mend it now.”

A murmur shivered through the crowd. Corin glanced past the councilors to the vast cloth. The tear had widened as if time itself were a blade. Its edges curled, threads stretched thin into pale lashes that trembled with the draft. What had been jagged now yawned—a wound, not a rip, and the cloth around it puckered with strain.

The council had prepared a scaffolding. Ladders rose to the height of the breach. Skeins lay in baskets—silks, wools, rich dyes that had not touched common looms in years. A table stood ready with tools: needles honed to a hair’s width, combs with teeth fine as breath, a reed narrower than a fingernail. Corin tasted iron in his mouth.

Green Robe, shoulders squared like beams, spoke first. “We will reinforce with tight bind-stitches and a double selvage, then lash the weak threads to a frame. No more yielding. We will *compel* the cloth to hold.”

Gold Wire, her hair coiled like a filament, lifted a braid of rare dye. “We will overlay brilliance on the drab place. The poor colors pulled the rent open. Beauty is strength; we will graft it in.”

The bearded councilor thudded his palm on the table. “If those fail, we cut and cauterize. Sacrifice the torn portion for the health of the rest.”

The elder said nothing. His eyes, clouded and tired, rested on Corin’s face as if searching it for something that had not been there yesterday.

Corin put his hand on the ladder. “I will go up,” he said. “But I ask one thing.”

“What do you demand now?” Green Robe scoffed.

“Not demand,” Corin answered quietly. “Permission. Let me work without command for a little while. No shouted orders. No knots forced by decree. Leave me with the cloth.”

The councilors bristled. The bearded man opened his mouth to refuse, but the elder’s staff touched the floor—a small sound, like a seed striking earth.

“Grant it,” the elder said. At the others’ protest, he lifted a weathered hand. “For one hour. We have bound much and healed little. Let him seek what our binding could not.”

Corin bowed and climbed.

The scaffolding swayed with his weight. From below, the tear had looked like an absence; from this height, it looked like a mouth gulping air. The cords of the warp were drawn taut, thin as thirst. The weft around the breach frayed to dust at his breath. Corin sat on the narrow plank, legs braced, and let his hands hover above the wound without touching it.

“Not mine,” he repeated softly, and felt foolish, and said it again.

He threaded his smallest needle with common flax, plain and clean. He had brought it from his shop while the city bathed in fear and the councils fetched silk. Then he did the strangest thing a threadsmith could do: nothing. He did not force the thread through. He did not knot the loose edges into submission. He waited.

The hall's air moved in long breaths from the high windows. As it passed, the warp quivered. A few loose ends drifted toward one another as if remembering that they had once been joined. Corin followed their motion with his eyes until three ends lay within the width of a fingernail, nearly meeting. He slid the needle beneath, open-handed, as he would coax a skittish bird to his palm.

He did not draw hard. He lifted the thread until the tiniest tension formed—a kiss, not a clamp. The loose ends brushed, caught each other's fray, and held. He made a second pass, not to bind them into a knot but to give them the small companionship of parallel lines. It held again.

A whisper rose from below. He heard words—"He does nothing—he stalls—no, look"—and knew the hour was shrinking.

He moved along the edge of the tear, seeking places where the cloth almost wanted to meet. In some, the smallest touch sent it recoiling, and he withdrew his hand as one withdraws from a living thing in pain. In others, he found that faint willingness, the almost. He followed those. Stitch by quiet stitch, he sketched not a seam but a path—thin, plain, hardly more than a rumor of repair.

Green Robe's voice shot up the ladder. "Bind it, man! Pull it tight, set your knots! If you cannot, we will."

Corin closed his eyes. The hillside returned to him—the view where chaos had curved into a hill, a tree, a sweep of light. The traveler's hand upon his shoulder. *Strength is not what is asked. Only surrender.*

He could not surrender the city, the council, the loom-world he had always known. He could surrender one thing.

He lifted his spindle, and in the hush of the high hall, he spoke—not to the cloth, not to the council, but to the One he could not see.

“This thread is Yours.”

It was no grand prayer, no flourish of words—only a yielding, a letting-go of the rope he had always wound around his wrist. He set the spindle upon the plank and let the length of flax lie loose across his palm. He did not guide it with the clutch of a craftsman who must prove he is equal to the wound. He waited to be guided.

A breath—perhaps only wind—moved along the cloth. The loose length lifted, just the width of a whisper, and settled into the cradle of two frayed ends he had not seen. He followed, not leading, and made the smallest pass. It held. He followed again. Two more held.

No flash of wonder split the hall. No veil tore from heaven. Yet the cloth ceased its shuddering recoil where he worked. The breach did not spit out his effort in contempt. In that narrow run of whisper-stitches, the Tapestry accepted his touch as if the resistance he had felt before were listening for a different hand—and found it in the emptying of his own.

Below, the murmurs changed tone. “It holds there—do you see?—a line as fine as hair—”

Gold Wire stepped closer to the base of the scaffold, eyes narrowed. “Technique,” she pronounced after a moment, voice cool. “A clever feint. He uses less tension to creep past the damage. It is trickery, not strength.”

The bearded councilor scowled. “It is too slow. The cloth will be gone by winter.”

Green Robe planted his fists on his hips. “Enough of this frailty. Pulley the lash-frame! We will pull tight and pin!”

Corin heard the rattle of rope. The hour had not ended, yet the council’s patience had. He looked down. The elder met his gaze across the hall’s distance, and something like pleading flickered there—a plea not for success but for truth.

Corin cut his thread cleanly and set the needle down. He did not want the lash-frame to tear through the whisper-line he had laid. He began to rise.

“Do not leave your station,” Green Robe barked, taking the ladder. “We will bind.” Others moved with him, hauling the frame with its nasty hooks. The hall filled with the iron smell of command.

“No.” Corin’s voice was not loud, but it fell strangely clear.

Hands paused on the rope.

He did not know he would say more until the words came. “You asked me to mend. I cannot mend by force. The cloth recoils from it. If you lash it now, you will rip what little holds. If I am to work, I must work without your frame.”

Green Robe stared up at him, incredulous. “You *refuse*?”

“I refuse to break the cloth to prove I am strong.”

A hiss of outrage ran through the guild banners. The bearded councilor slammed his palm on the table again. “Defiance! The city bleeds, and you nurse the wound like a pet!”

Corin's hands trembled on the plank. He did not feel brave. He felt like a man whose last coin had slipped into a crack in the floor and who chose, at last, not to break the house to fetch it.

The elder's staff found stone once more. "We granted him an hour." He looked at the water clock. "It is not yet spent."

Green Robe glared but stood down, ropes slackening.

Corin sat again, breath leaving him in a rush. He did not resume. The hour had grown heavy with eyes and iron. The whisper-line he had laid looked so thin from here that the smallest gust might lift it away.

He tied no knots. He watched the cloth. In the minute that followed, he saw a thing he would not have seen if he had been busy proving himself: the whisper-line, which he had thought frail, drew no strain. The stress that had been gathering at the edges of the tear did not press upon it as on a seam. Instead, grief found a gentler path around, as water finds the hollow in rock. The line did not hold the weight; it marked a way.

The water clock sang the last drop. The elder lifted his staff. "The hour is finished."

Green Robe surged. "Now we bind!"

The elder's tired voice carried no command and somehow more than command. "No. Not yet." He turned his face up to Corin. "Threadsmith, what do you need?"

Corin's answer surprised even him. "Time. And the Hall."

The bearded councilor barked a laugh. "You would have us empty the city's heart for your superstition?"

Corin chose his words with care. “I ask for one night. No crowd. No orders. Let the looms be still. If by dawn the tear is not bettered, do what you will with me.”

A silence fell that tasted like dust. The councilors pulled their grievances around their shoulders. The guild banners rustled like wings startled awake.

At last, the elder nodded once. “One night.” He turned to the others. “We will seal the doors. At sunrise, we will see what the night yields.”

Fury flashed through Green Robe’s face, then cooled into disdain. “At sunrise,” he said. “And if the cloth fails, he leaves with it.”

The bearded man grinned a wolfish grin. Gold Wire folded her arms.

Corin climbed down with care, every rung echoing in his bones. As his feet found the floor, the elder leaned closer, the lines at his eyes deep with fatigue and a grief beyond policy.

“What changed in you?” he asked softly, not like a judge but like a man who had once held a thread and found it slipping.

Corin searched for a word that could be spoken in a hall full of watching ears. He found only a small one. “I opened my hand.”

The elder’s gaze flicked to Corin’s wrist, bare of its old looped tether. Something like understanding, or perhaps yearning, crossed his face and was gone.

“Tonight, then,” he said.

Dusk thinned the crowd. The guards shoved the doors on their hinges and slid the iron bar. Outside, the city's noise ebbed to a restless murmur. Inside, the Hall breathed—a vast creature asleep. Corin stood alone with the Tapestry and the faint scent of old oil and dust.

He set his spindle on the bench and did not tie the thread to his wrist. He touched the whisper-line he had made; it was cool beneath his fingers, almost shy.

"Not mine," he said, and this time the words did not feel foolish.

Somewhere in the high dark, a draft stirred. It slipped along the warp, found the loose ends, and lifted them the width of a breath.

Corin drew a long breath of his own. He would not pry at hidden doors tonight. He would not lash or force. He would wait until the Hall's silence thinned enough that he could hear the small sound he had been missing all his life.

Not the clack of looms. Not the shouts of councils.

The sound a thread makes when it is taken gently by a hand you cannot see.

He sat on the floor beneath the wound and kept his hands open.

Night gathered.

Chapter 6: Into the Loom's Heart

The Hall was silent but not still. As the last echoes of the barred doors faded, Corin felt the vastness press close, as if the walls themselves leaned in to listen. Lanterns guttered high on their hooks, shadows climbing the pillars like vines. The Tapestry loomed above him, filling the chamber's far side from floor to vault. By day, it was a spectacle; by night, it was a presence.

Corin laid his spindle on the stone floor. The faint whisper-line he had stitched earlier gleamed pale in the lanternlight, fragile but unbroken. He ran his hand across the stone, then folded himself to his knees.

"I have no strength left," he said into the quiet. "If this cloth is Yours, then take it. If this thread is mine, then keep it. But if You will, weave it into what I cannot see."

His words seemed to vanish into the rafters. Yet somewhere, deep in the cloth, a tremor stirred.

At first, he thought it was only the draft. But as he watched, the threads nearest the wound shifted in patterns too measured for chance. They swayed, brushed, twined, as if hands invisible to his sight coaxed them into readiness.

Corin rose slowly. The air hummed faintly, like a note struck far away. His palms prickled. He reached for the spindle, but when he lifted it, the flax did not cling as before—it slipped with a freedom that startled him, falling smooth into his fingers.

He climbed the scaffolding until he stood level with the tear. The cloth no longer recoiled at his presence. It shivered, yes, but with expectancy rather than fear.

He whispered again, “Not mine,” and lifted the thread. This time, he did not guide it; he simply opened his hand.

The flax arced forward, caught between two stray threads, as if the air itself had chosen the path. Corin only followed, sliding the needle through in a single, unforced motion. Where he had strained before, now the cloth seemed to welcome him.

Pass after pass, the thread found its place. He scarcely knew if he stitched or was stitched through. His hands moved, but the design was not his. He was less a craftsman than a conduit.

Hours passed—he could not count how many. The lanterns sank lower, then steadied. At times his eyes blurred and he thought he saw more: colors shimmering faintly beyond dye, patterns that shifted like light on water. The tear did not vanish, but its edges softened, its fury calmed. What had been a raw gash now looked less like an absence and more like an opening.

Near midnight, he descended the scaffolding to rest. His body ached, but his spirit was strangely buoyant. He leaned back against a pillar and gazed upward.

The faint hum deepened. Corin blinked. Something behind the Tapestry glowed.

He rose, heart thundering. Crossing the floor, he traced the cloth’s edge until he found a narrow passage half-hidden behind a pillar. Few entered the maintenance corridors; they were meant only for caretakers who brushed dust from the Hall. Yet tonight the passage drew him as surely as a thread to a shuttle.

He stepped inside.

The corridor wound upward, narrow and dim. Dust clung to his boots. At its end, a door of iron stood half-ajar, a glow seeping through the crack.

Corin pushed.

The chamber beyond stole his breath.

It was a room behind the Tapestry—no, within it. Looms rose like pillars, immense, their beams vanishing into shadow. Threads stretched across them in every hue imaginable, some gleaming like fire, others dark as night. They crisscrossed in patterns too vast for his eye to follow. The sound was soft yet thunderous: the measured rhythm of weaving, though no visible hands moved the shuttles.

Corin stood trembling. He had entered the Loom's Heart.

He stepped nearer, and the glow deepened. The threads moved of their own accord, shuttles flying without touch, heddles lifting with unseen command. Here, there was no tangling, no fray. Every pass interlocked with perfect precision, patterns blooming and vanishing into greater patterns beyond.

He thought of the traveler's words: *The Weaver's hand*.

"Are You here?" Corin whispered.

The air thickened. He could not say he saw a figure, yet he felt Presence—the kind that makes knees bend though no command is spoken. Awe pressed him down, and he sank to the floor, face to stone.

The hum wrapped around him like a cloak. And in that low thunder he heard, not with ears but with heart:

Your thread is Mine.

Tears blurred his sight. “Take it,” he whispered. “Only weave it true.”

Something within him gave way. The fear, the striving, the shame of failure—all loosened, like knots pulled gently apart. What remained was a single thread, naked and simple, placed into a hand he could not see but could no longer doubt.

The Loom thundered once, then stilled. The glow dimmed. When Corin raised his head, the chamber was quiet. The shuttles hung motionless, the beams cold. He might have thought it a dream—except for the deep and immovable peace that settled in him.

He stumbled back down the corridor, into the Hall once more. The Tapestry above him seemed different. The tear was not gone, but its edges glowed faintly, as if light now seeped through from beyond.

Corin sank to the floor, exhaustion claiming him. He lay there beneath the cloth until sleep overtook him like a gentle hand across his brow.

At dawn, the iron bar of the doors clanged. The council entered, banners in tow, the people pressing close behind. Green Robe strode forward at once, gaze snapping to the Tapestry. His jaw dropped.

The tear was smaller. It had not vanished but gentled, as though the night had coaxed the cloth into healing. The

whisper-line remained, but it had multiplied, branching into delicate meshes that shimmered in the early light.

Gold Wire hissed through her teeth. “What trick is this?”

The bearded councilor gaped. “No trick could do this.”

The elder’s clouded eyes filled with sudden brightness. He turned to Corin, who stirred awake against the pillar. “Threadsmith… what happened here?”

Corin rose unsteadily. He searched for words that could fit the night’s wonder, but only one came.

“I yielded.”

The hall fell silent.

Chapter 7: The Choice

Dawn washed the Hall in a thin gray that made every thread look newly spun. The people crowded the thresholds despite the guards' protests, faces lifted to the vast cloth as if watching the sky for weather. The council stood in their places, banners stirring like held breaths. The elder's eyes were bright; Green Robe's were hard; Gold Wire's glinted cold; the bearded councilor's beard twitched with the urge to pronounce.

"What happened?" the elder asked again, more softly now, as if he did not wish to bruise the morning.

Corin stood where he had slept, weariness in his bones and something like light in his chest. "I yielded," he said.

Green Robe's laugh rang against stone. "A word for beggars. Tell us the *method*."

"There was no method," Corin answered. "Only an open hand."

"Superstition," the bearded man barked. "He buys time with fog."

Gold Wire lifted a braid of rare dye as if the sight might shame the plainness of Corin's flax. "Tricks in darkness mean nothing in the day. Bind it properly or stand aside."

The elder's gaze did not leave Corin's face. "Can you do again in daylight what the night has done?"

Corin looked up at the Tapestry. The wound had stilled, breathing now instead of gasping. He did not feel equal to it; he felt smaller than ever. Yet he knew which way was

forward, the way a loosened thread knows which direction leads home.

“I cannot,” he said—and held the startled silence a heartbeat longer—“but I can yield again.”

A stir moved through the crowd, not of scorn and not yet of faith—a listening.

Green Robe stepped forward, placing his boot on the first rung of the scaffold. “You will do it under command. Lash-frame ready. Double selvage. Pull tight at my word.”

“No,” Corin said, more gently than the word deserved. “If I take your rope, I take back my thread.”

Gold Wire hissed, “The cloth does not mend for metaphors.”

The elder’s staff found stone with its small, seed-sound. “One attempt, under his hand alone,” he said. “We bound and worsened; we bound and worsened again. Give room to a quieter way.”

The bearded man threw up his arms. “You would let a mender of alley-rags rewrite the order of the Hall?”

The elder did not lift his voice. “I would let a mender of alley-rags tell the truth he has found.”

Green Robe’s jaw worked as if chewing iron. “One attempt,” he spat. “When it fails, the frame goes on, and this… surrender ends.”

Corin nodded. He took up his spindle and did not tie it to his wrist.

The ladder swayed. From the height, the people were a shifting field of faces; the council's banners made slices of color in the gray hall. Corin knelt on the narrow plank. He let the thread spill into his palm and did not shape it. The cloth's breath met his fingers, cool as water.

He whispered, because he had no other way to begin, "Not mine."

The flax lifted the width of a sigh and found the place that wanted it. Corin followed, a small pass and then another, not closing a seam so much as tracing a path the cloth itself seemed to remember. The whisper-line he laid the night before took up the new length gladly, as vines take the trellis they were made to climb. A hush fell below that had nothing to do with law.

Gold Wire shaded her eyes, squinting to reduce wonder to technique. "He eases the tension," she pronounced. "A craftsman's trick."

"Then use it," someone from the crowd called, and others murmured agreement. A mother lifted a child so she could see. The child's face went still, as if she had heard music that adults had forgotten.

Green Robe could not bear the stillness. "Pull!" he shouted to the men stationed at the lash-frame. The ropes rattled in hands eager to obey.

The elder raised a palm. "Not yet."

"Insolence!" the bearded man snapped. "Since when does the Hall answer to whispers?"

“Since shouts unraveled it,” the elder said, and the years in his voice silenced them for a breath.

Up on the plank, Corin moved and did not move. He felt the warp and weft under his fingers like the skin of a living thing. There were places he dared not touch—the cloth flinched there yet. He left them. There were places where two ends reached toward each other without knowing how to meet. He gave them only the smallest encouragement and then withdrew, the way one steps back to let an apology be finished.

He threaded until his hands trembled more from awe than from effort. When he leaned away, the line he had laid was so fine it scarcely seemed to exist—and yet the rent did not gape there. The strain had found another course, called away by a path gentler than force.

He looked down.

The traveler stood near the door, plain as a stone in a riverbed. Their eyes met. The man did not smile. He only inclined his head as if to say, *You know now*. Then he was part of the crowd again.

Corin descended, every rung a question the city would have to answer.

Green Robe pounced. “A child’s seam. A hair across a wound. It will fail by noon.”

Gold Wire was too careful to commit. “Pretty, and nothing more.”

The bearded councilor's voice dropped low and dangerous. "Enough parlor tricks. Frame it. Bind until it screams if it must. The city lives or dies here."

The elder turned to Corin. "This is the hour of choice," he said softly, perhaps to himself as much as to the threadsmith. "Not of cleverness—of allegiance."

Corin felt the truth of it in his bones. This was not a question of technique any longer. It was a question of who held the cloth.

He looked past the council to his own small square on the side wall of the Hall. It had always been plain. In recent days, its lower edge had begun to loosen, threads tiring, pattern slurring into near-ruin. He crossed to it while the council argued the law with itself. He stood before his life and laid his hand on it as one might lay a hand on the brow of a fevered friend.

He unhooked the square.

Gasps rippled behind him. To take one's weaving from the wall was permitted only for repair under supervision. To do it now, without leave, was to declare something no rule could contain.

He set the square on the bench and stared at the edge where the threads had let go. He had mended others for years and protected his own as best he could; he had never willingly given a length from his life to anything beyond it. He found a single stout strand near the loosening. He pulled.

It hurt. Not flesh, but something tenderer. The pattern he had made faltered where the strand left, a small emptiness opening like a mouth of grief. He kept pulling until he held a length long enough to bridge more than the distance. He

coiled it in his palm. It was plain flax, the first thread he had learned with as a boy. He had always kept it safe.

He turned with the coil in his hand. The people watched without speaking. Even Green Robe's mouth had gone shut.

Corin climbed again.

At the tear, he did not rush to lay the strand. He opened his hand and waited. When the breath moved, it lifted the plain thread—not silk, not glory—and carried it toward a place where darkness thinned at the edges. Corin followed. The thread slipped in with the grace of something that had been wanted all along. He made the smallest pass he could, as if he might break a bird's bone with any more.

The cloth received it.

Light bloomed—not the dramatic blaze of spectacle, but the quiet increase of morning when someone draws back a curtain. The edges of the rent did not close, but they softened as banks soften when a river finds its course. In the fine mesh forming there, the color of Corin's plain strand seemed to change—not to gold or crimson but to the exact hue the pattern needed, as water takes the color of the sky without ceasing to be water.

A breath like a sob went through the Hall. A woman near the door began to cry without shame. Somewhere, a man laughed once, the laugh of someone who has been given back a thing he did not know how to ask for.

The traveler remained still, and if his eyes shone, it was no more than any other's.

Corin descended with empty hands.

Green Robe found his voice. “Witchery,” he said, but it came out thin. He pointed, grasping for law. “He has vandalized his own square! There are penalties—”

The elder looked at Corin’s place on the wall. The little emptiness where the strand had been did not gape now; some gentle order had already begun to reweave around it, as water calms after a stone is lifted. His voice, when it came, held a rasp and a tenderness both.

“Penalty for offering?” he asked Green Robe. “When we fasten ropes to the city’s heart and call it medicine?”

Gold Wire drew herself taller. “You would abandon craft? Rules? The guilds?”

“I would abandon nothing that is true,” the elder said. “But I will not call rope wisdom when rope has strangled us.”

The bearded man thrust his chin at Corin. “Then choose, threadsmith. Bind by law, or be cast out.”

Corin looked at the lash frame: hooks sharpened to bite, ropes eager for hands. He looked at the whisper lines he had laid, so fine they could be mistaken for light. He looked at the people—fearful, angry, aching—and at the traveler, whose presence asked nothing and gave no show, only waited like a door already open.

He thought of the Loom’s Heart. Of the voice that was more than sound. Of the peace that did not scold and did not flatter and did not leave.

“I have chosen,” he said. “My thread is not mine.”

“Then your place in the Hall is not yours either,” the bearded councilor growled.

“Perhaps,” Corin said. He did not try to protect himself with a net of arguments. He did not raise his hands to show that nothing was hidden in them. He only let them be empty.

The elder lifted his staff. “Hear my judgment,” he said, and the hall quieted because the years in him had taught them that some judgments are not decrees but acknowledgments. “For three days, the Hall will be cleared at night. The frames will not touch the cloth. The threadsmith will work as he has declared—by yielding. At dawn on the fourth day, we will see what has been made.”

Green Robe’s protest cracked. “You give the city into the hands of wind.”

The elder’s tired smile almost showed. “Perhaps the city has never left them.”

Gold Wire’s eyes narrowed to slits. “And if on the fourth day the wound yawns wider?”

“Then we will have our answer,” the elder said, and lowered his staff so its end kissed stone—seed to soil, again.

The crowd broke—not with cheers or chaos, but with the murmur of a market when rain is promised after drought. Some faces shone wet; others were tight as fists. A few turned away in disgust. Many did not know what they felt, and that was honest.

The guards opened the doors. People spilled into the square, taking the rumor with them: *He opened his hand. He gave his own thread. The cloth received it.*

Corin stood alone a moment longer with the Tapestry. He touched the place where his plain strand had gone and felt, through the cloth, the faintest echo, as if somewhere within the Loom a shuttle had answered.

The traveler came to stand beside him.

“You have chosen,” he said.

Corin nodded. “It still frightens me.”

“It will,” the traveler answered. “Choice is a door, not a hallway. Every step you take through it is another yes.”

“Will the cloth hold?”

The traveler did not look at the tear. “The Weaver does not fail.”

Corin let the words rest where they landed, not as a slogan to carry like a banner, but as bread taken and swallowed.

“Tonight, then,” he said.

“Tonight,” the traveler agreed, and slipped back into the city as if he had been threading its streets long before Corin learned to spin.

Corin returned his small square to the wall. The gap his strand had left was no longer an accusation. It was a promise that the pattern extended beyond the edges he had drawn for it.

He left the Hall with his spindle untied, his hands unburdened, and the day wide before him like cloth yet unrolled.

Chapter 8: The Tear Repaired

By sundown, the Hall had emptied as before. Guards set the iron bar, and the sound of it touching stone carried through the high chamber like the closing of a book. Outside, the city murmured; inside, the vast cloth breathed.

Corin stood alone beneath the wound. The whisper-lines he had laid in daylight trembled faintly in the draft, not with strain but with expectancy, the way a spider's strand quivers when a breeze announces morning.

He did not rush to the scaffold. He laid his palm on the floor and let his breath settle. "Not mine," he said, and felt the words land as they had the night before—not as a charm, but as a door.

He climbed.

The flax lay across his open hand like water that remembers the sea. He did not drive it; he followed. The cloth guided him to the small willingnesses—the almost-meetings along the jagged edge—and he traced them with patient passes, no knot forced, no seam demanded to carry what it could not bear. Where he had once stitched to prove skill, he now stitched to keep company with a work already underway.

Near midnight, a soft rap sounded at the side entrance—three taps, then silence. Corin froze, listening. The guards were gone; the door should have been still. Yet the taps came again, shy as a bird.

He descended and unlatched the small door used by sweepers. On the threshold stood the elder, hood drawn low against the chill. He did not step inside. Instead, he held out a length of thread—plain, well-spun, not new. "From a widow," he said. "She pulled it from the hem of her own

weaving. She asked that it go where it is needed more than on her wall."

Corin cupped it with both hands. "I cannot repay her."

The elder's tired eyes softened. "She asked for thanks to go to the One who takes what is offered."

Corin nodded. When he looked up, the elder had already turned away into the dark.

He climbed again and opened his hand. The widow's thread moved as if it knew the path before it. It slipped into a place he had not yet dared touch—near the center of the rent, where the cloth still flinched like flesh. The strand lay down there as balm lies on a burn. The tension eased a degree. The whisper-lines knitted to the gift as ivy takes a trellis and makes it bloom.

By dawn, the wound was smaller. Not closed, no—its edges still spoke of tearing—but the anger had gone out of it. The cloth no longer gulped air. It breathed.

When the bar lifted and the doors opened, a hush came in with the light. The people's feet made little sound on stone. Some wept without noise; others stood with their hands clasped before their mouths, as if a loud word might tear again what gentleness had healed.

Green Robe's eyes flashed from the tear to the lash-frame and back. "Illusion," he muttered. "Another hair across a wound." But he spoke it to convince himself, and even he did not seem persuaded.

Gold Wire leaned forward. "What did you use?" she asked coolly. "What dye? What trick of tension?"

“A widow’s thread,” Corin said. “And an open hand.”

“A sentiment,” she replied, but the word fell thin.

The elder said nothing. He only kept bringing, all that morning and into the afternoon—quietly, privately, with the dignity of a man who has learned to carry gifts as if they are seeds. A child’s ribbon, bright and frayed where a beloved knot had lived too long; a laborer’s coarse cord, sweat-polished and honest; a scholar’s pale strand, brittle with years; a dyer’s scrap she could have sold twice over. Not spools from storerooms, not show-skeins from guild vaults—pieces pulled from the edges of lives, the kind of giving that leaves a small emptiness on a wall and a larger fullness in a heart.

Corin received them as a steward receives bread for the hungry—not to hoard, not to waste. He climbed and climbed again. He learned the quiet discipline of withdrawing his hand when the cloth recoiled and of waiting until it stilled. He learned to leave places untended when they called for a touch not yet given. He learned the joy of watching the Weaver answer in ways no craft could command: the laborer’s coarse thread, once laid, took on a supple strength; the scholar’s brittle length softened as dew softens tinder; the child’s bright ribbon, surrendered, found a hue more fitting than brilliance—a gentleness that made other colors kinder.

Green Robe paced along the base of the scaffold like a caged bull. More than once, he reached for the lash-frame ropes and was stayed by the elder’s staff tapping its seed-sound. “Three nights,” the elder would say. “We gave our word.” The bearded councilor grumbled threats about law and penalties and order; Gold Wire observed with narrow

eyes and a ledger's mind, searching for a lever she could name.

The traveler appeared and vanished in the crowd, never approaching the scaffold, never lifting his voice. Once, as Corin descended to rest, they passed within arm's length. "He delights in these," the traveler murmured, and Corin knew he meant the threads offered at cost.

By the second night, the tear had changed its nature. It was no longer merely a breach to be closed; it had become a place where threads met who would never have found each other in ordinary weaving. The widow's plain strand crossed the dyer's subtle hue; the child's ribbon lay beside the laborer's cord; and over, under, through them all, Corin felt the same strange ordering he had sensed in the Loom's Heart—the way small obediences flower into designs no hand could have drafted.

Near midnight of that second vigil, he felt the pull again—the hum in the marrow, the warmth behind the cloth. He left the scaffold and slipped into the maintenance corridor, up to the iron door, into the chamber that was more than a chamber.

When he entered, the Loom stood in silence, yet it was the full silence of a held breath, not the emptiness of neglect. Corin knelt, and awe bent him lower. He offered no speech, only his hands, open.

He did not see hands; he did not need to. He felt the passing of Presence like the shadow of a wing across his bowed head. And though the shuttles did not move where he could see them, he knew, in the way knowing sometimes arrives without route, that the Weaver gathered what had been surrendered and bore the strain Himself. The tear was not

mended by trick; it was mended by bearing—by taking into the Pattern what would have torn lesser work apart.

Corin descended with a peace too deep for explanation. That night, he set no more stitches. He sat under the cloth and kept his hands open until dawn unbarred the doors.

On the third day, the city changed. Some still sneered, teeth bared with fear. But others began to loosen their grip—not only on thread. A shopkeeper set aside the scale she had used to weigh. A father returned a tool he had borrowed and kept. A guild master unrolled an old grievance and let it fall like lint to the floor. These were not grand acts. They were small, and they cost. Something in the air made such offerings feel less like loss and more like joining a song long underway.

That evening, as shadows lengthened like unspooled ribbon, Green Robe arrived at the Hall with a retinue of guildmen and a proclamation sealed in green wax. "At dawn," he announced, voice grand and voice frayed, "the frame will go on, by statute, by reason, by duty. If the breach is not whole, the threadsmith will be removed and craft restored to hands that respect it."

The elder looked older than he had that morning. "At dawn," he agreed, but his eyes flicked to Corin with quiet courage—as if to say dawn is often misnamed.

The bar came down for the third night.

Corin did what he had done each night and what he would do on his last: he did not begin with the scaffold. He knelt. "Not mine," he said, and the words had become, for him, not fatigue and not resignation, but worship.

He climbed. The breach was narrow now, not a mouth gulping air but a thin-lipped wound that remembered its pain even as it forgot how to hurt. He took the last of the widow's gift and the end of the laborer's cord and the final length of the child's ribbon—none long enough to boast of their usefulness—and he opened his hand.

What followed could not be told as a technique. The threads did not perform; they obeyed. Corin's fingers did not control; they consented. He passed the needle once, twice, and then he halted, not from fatigue but from certainty, the way a singer knows where to rest because silence is part of the song.

He leaned back. The Hall held its breath.

There was still a line where tearing had been. It did not vanish into denial; it shone. The place that had been raw was now strong—not through thickness, not through knots, but through the way the whole cloth bore it. Light from the high windows found it first and lingered there as morning lingers on water. The whisper-lines that had looked like hair now read as filaments of a design so fine the eye needed the heart to see it.

Corin did not dare put another stitch.

He climbed down, hands empty, soul full.

He sat beneath the Tapestry and leaned his head against the pillar where he had lain on the first night. He listened. The cloth did not gasp. It sang—not loudly, not with spectacle, but with that low note he had heard in the Loom's Heart, the kind that steadies the bones of a house.

Near the side entrance door, the traveler stood. He had brought nothing and asked nothing and was content with both. “It is enough,” he said.

“Is it finished?” Corin asked, not as a craftsman checking off a task, but as a man asking after the weather on which a harvest depends.

“For what this chapter requires,” the traveler answered. “The Weaver tends not only cloth, but time.”

Corin smiled—tired, relieved, aware that fatigue and joy can coexist and often do when both are honest. “At dawn they will judge.”

“They will witness,” the traveler said, and his eyes held no fear.

The night thinned. The iron bar rose. Light stepped across the floor.

The elder entered first, alone. He looked up and drew a breath that sounded like a man setting down a stone he had carried too far. The council followed—Green Robe tight-lipped, Gold Wire keen-eyed, the bearded councilor ready to pronounce. The people poured in, filling the aisles, filling the air with held breath.

They stared at the place that had been a wound.

There was no rip. There was a scar—not shameful, not hidden, not raw. It was the most beautiful part of the cloth.

No trumpet marked the moment. No verdict rang. A child laughed once, quick as a bell. A woman whispered, “Blessed be the hand we cannot see.” A man who had sharpened hooks for the lash-frame stood with his hands

hanging uselessly and did not seem humiliated by the absence of their task.

Green Robe found words last. “It will not hold,” he said, but the sentence lacked a future. It fell into the present and broke there.

Gold Wire’s ledger eyes softened, though she did not yet know it. “There is… continuity,” she murmured, as if naming a property that must be honored sooner or later.

The bearded councilor opened his mouth and closed it, his beard working with unspoken law.

The elder leaned on his staff and did not speak. He gazed at the mended place as if it answered questions he had carried since he first learned to tie a knot. Then, very softly, he said, “Let the Hall be still.”

It was.

Corin stood beneath the Tapestry he had not mended and felt the gift of being small. He knew the work ahead would not be easy; he knew there would be other tears, other nights, other choices. But the city had seen a thing no decree could forge: a wound borne and made beautiful.

He lifted his hands, empty as they had been when he began.

“Not mine,” he said, and the cloth—whole where it had broken—seemed to answer with the same quiet word.

Chapter 9: The Unveiling

Word ran faster than any herald: *The wound is whole. The scar is beautiful.* By afternoon, the square filled again, not with accusation but with a tremulous wondering—as if the city had woken to a note that had been sounding all along and only now remembered how to listen. The looms in a dozen houses fell quiet of their own accord. On stoops and shop thresholds, people spoke in low tones and did not quite know where to put their hands.

The council stood beneath their banners, unsettled in victory. The elder watched the Tapestry with the gaze of a man seeing his own childhood from a distance and understanding, for the first time, what his father might have meant. Green Robe paced the flagstones until the edges of his robe darkened with dust. Gold Wire kept her ledger closed and her eyes open. The bearded councilor cleared his throat several times and discovered he had nothing weighty to announce.

Corin remained near the pillar where he had first slept. Fatigue clung to him like the scent of oil, but a lighter thing traveled with it—a quiet that did not depend on silence.

The traveler stood a little apart, neither summoning nor withdrawing, as present as breath and as unclaimed.

At length, the elder lifted his staff. “Let the city see,” he said, not as a proclamation but as permission long overdue. “Not in a crush and not in a clamor. Come, and be still.”

They entered as a slow river. Children came first, because adults who had forgotten how to be small made room for those who had not. The guards did not bark; their spears rested like tall reeds in a lake.

A little girl with a gap between her front teeth stood beneath the scar and laughed once—pure, like a bell. “It’s like when the sky heals after lightning,” she whispered, and her mother pressed her hand to her mouth as if she had said something holy by accident.

A laborer squinted up and touched the edge of his cap. “There—do you see?” he murmured to no one in particular. “That coarse cord is mine, I think, and I swear it lies finer here than it ever did in my square.” He did not sound proud. He sounded relieved.

A widow near the aisle reached for the stone to steady herself. Then, finding that the stone was not enough, she knelt. She did not hide her tears.

Green Robe snorted softly. “Perspective,” he told Gold Wire. “You can trick the eye with distance and light.”

Gold Wire did not answer him. She was measuring without her ledger. “If it is a trick,” she said at last, “it is a trick that strengthens.”

The elder turned, scanning the press of faces. “We have always looked too close,” he said, half to himself. “We judge the knot and miss the pattern.”

The traveler’s voice carried only to Corin. “They will not all see,” he said. “The Weaver does not force the eye. He only offers it a place to rest.”

Corin looked up at the mended place. From the floor, it was exquisite. From the scaffold, it had been obedient. From the hillside, it might be something else entirely.

“May I take them higher?” he asked, surprising himself with the boldness of it.

The elder heard, or perhaps only understood. “Open the high walk,” he told the guards. The narrow stair that wound into the rafters had gathered dust for years; it had been built for caretakers, not citizens. Yet now, carefully, in small groups, people climbed.

From the high walk, the Hall opened like a map. The Tapestry was no longer a wall that filled the eye but a country that could be crossed by gaze. The scar, from here, did not disappear. It drew lines that the closer view had hidden. Threads that had seemed opposed now traveled together before parting with purpose. Colors that had argued at arm’s length sang in chords.

A boy near Corin tugged his sleeve. “Look,” he said, breathless. “Do you see it? Is that—?” He could not name it, and that was right. Names too soon would flatten what should remain round. But the boy’s bright ribbon, surrendered the day before, lay in the mended place like a thin wing. He did not point to it again. He only smiled so hard it almost hurt to watch.

“Open the windows,” the elder said softly, and the guards worked the old gears. High shutters groaned, and noon shouldered its way into the Hall. Light spilled at an angle rarely seen, striking the Tapestry not squarely but slant, revealing textures that morning and evening conceal. Gasps rose where beams found the scar and made it gleam like water over stone.

Then—perhaps because of light, perhaps because hearts were less armored, perhaps because the Weaver delights in timing as much as in design—a thing happened that Corin had only suspected on the hillside and barely dared hope for.

The mended place was not only beautiful.

It was meaningful.

It echoed something larger, something the eye recognized without ever having seen. Not an animal, not a tower, not a banner—something like a river running through a valley, gathering tributaries surrendered from a hundred hills. The widow's thread made a silvered seam along its edge. The laborer's cord laid a line across, like a bridge that was both crossing and welcome. The scholar's brittle pale length lent shape to the far bank, not as parchment, but as winter light. And the child's ribbon—now gentled—caught where the river narrowed, so that what had been brightness in a knot became guidance in a flow.

"There," someone cried softly, "there—do you see the hands?" And indeed, if the eye listened long enough, it seemed two hands cupped the river—not crushing it, not forcing it, holding it to its course. The hands were not drawn with thread as lines are drawn with ink; they were implied by the way everything else consented to lie. You could miss them through hurry. You could deny them by will. But if you yielded, they appeared.

Green Robe stared and did not admit what he saw. He ground his heel against the plank. "Coincidence," he said, but softly now, hoarding the word like stale bread against hunger.

The bearded councilor tried to speak law into the moment and found his mouth dry. "Order," he rasped, and the word did not insult what he meant; it simply failed to contain it.

Gold Wire's lips parted, and for a heartbeat her ledger forgot to breathe. She lowered her eyes—not in shame, but

because there is a way of looking that is also a kind of kneeling.

Down below, where the slow river of citizens still entered the Hall, the elder set his staff against the wall and leaned with both hands on the stone. His shoulders shook once, and he let them. No one seemed diminished by the sight.

Corin stood very still. He remembered the Loom's Heart and the voice that was more than sound. He remembered the feel of his own thread when he pulled it from his life and found that the pain in the giving had become peace in the placing. He remembered the traveler's words: *Your thread is Mine*.

"Is this the end of it?" he asked, though he knew better. He asked anyway, because human hearts often need to hear what they already believe.

The traveler rested his elbows on the rail as if he were leaning over a river on a bridge he had built himself. "It is an unveiling," he said. "Not the last."

"What will they do with it?" Corin's eyes moved over the faces, the tears, the tight jaws, the hands that fluttered and then folded and then lay still.

"They will choose," the traveler said. "Some will bring thread. Some will bring rope. Some will bring nothing but themselves, and that will be enough."

They watched in silence for a time. A man whose trade was sharpening hooks for the lash-frame lifted his hands as if feeling the weight of tools that were not there and then let them fall. He whispered something, perhaps an apology, perhaps a prayer. A girl who had laughed earlier stood very straight, as if being small was the most dignified posture

available. A dyer pressed her palm to her chest and smiled the way a person smiles when relief has the decency to arrive without fanfare.

“Why scars?” Corin asked at last. “Why not a seamless mending? Why leave the mark?”

The traveler did not look away. “Because the Weaver does not despise what was broken,” he said. “He honors the bearing of it. Scars remember. They teach the cloth what it is to be held.”

Corin thought of his own square—how the small gap where his strand had been taken had not become a shame but a promise. He thought of the city’s small offerings, threads pulled at cost from the edges of ordinary lives. He thought of the way the scar now sang in light.

From the floor below, the elder’s voice floated up, quiet and clear. “Let the looms rest today,” he said. “Let there be no command, no decree—only thanks.” He did not make a feast of it; he did not wrap it in ritual. He simply gave the city the permission it needed to be unbusy in the presence of something that asked for more than effort.

Green Robe bristled, and then the bristle tired. Gold Wire closed her ledger and did not open it again that hour. The bearded councilor found a bench and sat, as if the best law in that moment was to sit where he had always stood.

Corin and the traveler climbed down with the last of the highwalkers. At the foot of the stairs, a boy waited with both hands closed into small fists. When Corin stopped, the boy opened his right hand and revealed a knot—ugly, beloved, the kind boys tie at six and carry into seven like a secret badge.

“It’s from my first practice,” he said, not quite meeting Corin’s eyes. “I kept it because I thought it was mine. But if the Weaver can use it…”

Corin took the knot as if it were a treasure, which it was. “He can,” he said. “He delights to.”

The boy breathed out, lighter by the weight of a string and something heavier.

By dusk, the Hall had grown empty again. The city held its peculiar sabbath like a fragile cup. People walked more slowly to the wells. A market argument dwindled to a shrug. A woman sang while sweeping, not loudly and not for show. A father taught a son to tie a better knot and then, remembering the boy’s open hand, untied it and laughed.

The elder found Corin near the pillar. He did not speak at first. He looked at the scar and at how light found it, even when light had to bend to do so.

“I spent many years tightening ropes,” he said finally. “I called it keeping the city safe. Perhaps sometimes it was. Often it was only keeping me from admitting I was afraid.”

Corin did not answer with wisdom. He had none that would not cheapen a confession by trying to finish it for him.

The elder reached into his robe and drew out a single thread, humble as any. “From the hem,” he said. “I am not a widow, but I am willing to be poorer by this much.” He placed it in Corin’s palm.

Corin closed his fingers and felt the weight of lightness.

“Tomorrow,” the elder said, “we will need words again. The city does not run on silence alone. But not tonight.”

“Not tonight,” Corin echoed.

When the guards slid the bar across the doors, it no longer sounded like a verdict. It sounded like sleep.

Corin stepped into the street with his spindle untied and the elder’s thread warm in his fist. The traveler walked beside him and said nothing until they reached the corner where the alley opened to the wider road.

“You are a witness now,” he said. “Not a master of cloth. Not a keeper of doors. A witness. Keep your hands open.”

Corin nodded. He would fail at that sometimes, he knew. Hands close. Fear rises. Rope persuades. But he also knew the sound a thread makes when it is taken gently by a hand he cannot see, and he suspected that once a man knows that sound, he can find it again, even in noise.

Behind them, the Hall breathed. Ahead, the city did, too.

The scar in the Tapestry—honored, bright—held like a promise written where everyone could read it, even if not all chose to.

Night came, and for once it did not feel like losing light.

Chapter 10: A New Calling

Morning came without hurry. It did not burst like victory; it arrived like bread set quietly on a table. The city woke to its work, but not at once. Doors opened later than usual. Brooms moved more slowly. People greeted one another as if sound itself had learned to bow.

Corin unlatched his shop and left the door wide. The sun pooled on the threshold and caught the dust in small galaxies that rose and fell on the room's breath. He did not tie his working thread to his wrist. The old loop of habit lay on the bench and looked like a thing shed, not lost.

He tidied as a man does when he expects company, not customers—tools set to hand, stool drawn out, the little shelf with water and bread made neat. He had hardly finished when the bell tapped once, then again, as if unsure of its welcome.

A woman stepped in with a child clinging to her skirt. She carried her weaving wrapped in cloth. “It is not for the Hall,” she said, breathless from the apology she had prepared somewhere between home and door. “Only for our wall. It pulled wrong here.” She touched the corner. “I would have asked yesterday, but—” She faltered, thinking of the scar, the light, the hush.

Corin nodded and took the piece in both hands. The errant threads curled as if embarrassed. He did not reach at once. “Tell me,” he said, and the woman blinked, surprised that the question might mean her and not merely her cloth.

“My mother is ill,” she said simply. “There has been little time. I worked by lamplight and… I pulled too hard. It slipped.”

Corin turned the corner of the weave. “May I ask something else?”

She nodded, wary and willing both.

“If a thread from this piece would help another where it is needed more, would you let it go?”

She startled. “From my own? But this is for our wall.”

“It is,” Corin agreed. “And it will remain yours. Giving a length does not abandon the whole. It joins it.”

The child peered around the bench. “Like the widow?” he whispered, proud to know a story that had not been his yesterday.

“Like the widow,” Corin said.

The woman’s mouth trembled, then steadied. “Take what is needed,” she said, breath falling into the kind of calm that follows a decision. “And please show me how to mend what is left without making a knot that will show my hurry.”

Corin smiled. He showed her where to ease the pull, how to guide the thread so it did not carry more than its share. He did not say “do not strain”; he showed her where elusiveness means “wait” and how patience reads tension as one anticipates rain. When he finished, she unwound a short, honest length and set it in his hand with the deftness of someone who has given coins before but only now learned how to give.

“For the Hall?” she asked.

“For wherever the Weaver wants it,” he said.

She left lighter than she had come, though her load was unchanged in weight.

The bell tapped again almost at once. Then again. By noon the shop held a quiet procession—an apprentice with a torn sleeve and shame on his ears; a grandmother with a little square woven by a granddaughter who had more zeal than skill; a dyer with a stain on her cuff and a conscience with one to match; a man whose rope-marks from the lash-frame work had reddened his palms and, for the first time, troubled his sleep.

Corin mended where mending was fitting. Where it was not, he waited until the hurried hand across the counter stopped trying to prove and started asking to learn. He spoke little. He let the work teach. He asked, also, when it was time, "Will you give a length?" and sometimes the answer was "not yet," and that was not a defeat; it was an honest day. Sometimes the answer was "I cannot spare it," and he did not scold. Sometimes a hand that had closed on "no" opened on "yes" because the Weaver is kind in the space between.

Near midafternoon, the elder entered and sat without ceremony on the stool by the wall. He had left his staff at the Hall, not because he was less the elder, but because he did not need to bring the Hall into every room he entered.

"I have threads," he said, and laid several short lengths on the bench—none grand, all true. "And questions," he added, smiling in a way that made the years on his face seem well-spent and not merely accumulated.

"Ask," Corin said.

“When we must speak to the city again,” the elder began, “how do we give words to what is not held by words? There are laws that keep men from stealing bread. There are also laws that become bread for thieves.”

Corin lifted one of the elder’s lengths—plain and sturdy, the sort of thread fathers teach sons to trust. “Perhaps you ask the city not to begin with the rule,” he said, surprised to hear the thought formed aloud. “Begin at the hand. Let the rules keep old wolves out, but do not make a cage for sheep. And when a rule keeps a man from opening his hand, change the rule.”

The elder breathed out and nodded. “You will not join the council?” he asked, though he knew the answer.

“I am not called to that loom,” Corin said. “If I sat where you sit, my hands would itch for frames.”

“Mine still do,” the elder admitted, and they both laughed, the small laugh of men who have learned that confession can lighten what pride makes heavy.

The elder rose. “Walk with me later,” he said. “There is talk I would like you to hear and silence I would like you to keep me in, if the talk grows louder than needful.”

“I will,” Corin said.

After he left, Green Robe came.

He did not enter fully. He hovered with one foot on the threshold as if the floor inside might belong to a law that would judge him. His robe, impeccable as always, showed a single loose thread at the hem—an outrage to his own standards that he hadn’t noticed.

“I came,” he said, “to see the trick.” He stopped, saw he was in the wrong room for that sentence, and tried again. “To see the… method.”

Corin gestured to the bench. “Sit.”

Green Robe sat like a man consenting, not choosing. He placed his hands on his knees so they would have somewhere to be.

“I cannot call what happened in the Hall unlawful,” he said at last, each word exact. “The statutes do not anticipate miracles.”

Corin shook his head. “I would not name it that. Miracles make crowds clever. The Weaver made us quiet.”

Green Robe’s jaw worked. “Words,” he said. Then, after a pause that had cost in it: “My daughter stopped speaking to me last winter. I tried to bind what I had loosened, and I constricted the wound. I made rules for her grief.” He looked at the little disobedient thread at his hem and did not pull it. “If a length from my own weaving could… if it would help… I do not know how to begin.”

Corin lifted no sermon. He leaned, took small scissors from the bench, and held them open in his palm. “Begin by not doing it yourself,” he said gently. “Let the Weaver tell you where to cut, and when. Sometimes the first length is not thread but pride. It is harder to unwind and leaves no tidy spool.” He waited, not as a test but as space.

Green Robe stared at the scissors. He stared at his hands. He took a slow breath, then another, as if learning a new shape for air. He reached for the hem of his robe and found the small rogue thread. He did not yank. He eased. He felt it give, and it hurt in a place that rules have no names for.

He set the short length in Corin’s hand and covered it with his own for a moment longer than necessary, as if a transfer of weight were happening that eyes could not see.

“For the Hall?” he asked, hoarse.

“For wherever the Weaver wants it,” Corin said, and Green Robe nodded as if this sentence had finally found where to land in him.

He left without looking back. His shoulders were not straighter, not yet, but they were no longer pretending they had never bent.

Gold Wire came at twilight. She did not hover in the doorway. She entered like accuracy made flesh. She placed on the bench a spool of costly dye and a thread from the hem of her sleeve. “One is for selling,” she said. “One is for giving. I do not intend to confuse the two.”

Corin inclined his head. “Wisdom,” he said, and meant it. He mended the narrow tear in her cuff without hiding the place entirely. “You will have a mark,” he told her. “It will please or offend you depending on the day.”

She smiled with half of her mouth. “Then it is honest,” she said, and she left with her ledger still closed under her arm.

When evening gathered, the traveler appeared and leaned in the doorway as if it were a tree he remembered from boyhood. He watched the light climb the far wall and said nothing until the watching itself had become a kind of talk.

“Will there be more tears?” Corin asked.

“Yes,” the traveler said simply. “Some made by carelessness. Some by malice. Some allowed so that mercy can be seen.”

Corin’s hands opened without instruction. “Then I will need more thread.”

“You will need more surrender,” the traveler said, not unkindly. “Thread is abundant. Open hands are rarer.”

They walked to the Hall together. The doors were unbarred, and citizens moved in twos and threes, not to gawk or argue, but as families walk at dusk to a field where something good grows against the odds. The scar in the Tapestry held the last light. It had become a place people came to tell the truth to themselves in low voices.

The elder greeted them with a nod that had prayer in it. He stood with a small company: guild leaders, a dyer, and the hook-sharpener who had purposely not found his tools where he had left them that morning. They were not drafting decrees. They were sharing thread—small lengths, honest. They spoke of a box where such gifts might be kept until needed, of a door that would be left unbarred for anyone who wished to bring a length in the night and tell no one. They spoke, and between their sentences, they let stillness speak more.

“Will you oversee the box?” the elder asked Corin.

“I will tend it,” Corin said. “I will not own it.”

“Good,” the elder answered, and the hook-sharpener laughed once—the short laugh of a man who knows he has been spared from the task he deserved.

Later, when lamps gilded the arches, a boy came with his knot—the same badge of beginner's pride he had pressed into Corin's hand the day before. "I tied another," he said, grinning. "Worse." He held it up, and it was indeed a marvel of determined wrongness.

Corin laughed softly. "You learned," he said.

The boy's grin dimmed. "Is there any use for it?"

"Perhaps," Corin said, and he turned the little snarl in his fingers until he could see, not the failure, but the shape it could suggest if placed rightly—a spur in a river, a curl of cloud. "Not every error can be kept as a monument. But some can be redeemed into a line the pattern needs." He handed it back. "Keep this until you know whether it belongs to the Tapestry or to the bin. Either can be obedience."

The boy nodded, proud again for a truer reason, and he ran to tell someone who would either understand or learn from it.

They stayed until the lamps sank low. The traveler stood with them and then apart and then with them again, as ever. When he took his leave, he did not do it with a speech. He simply pressed a palm lightly to Corin's shoulder and said, "Witness," and he was gone into the kind of darkness that does not hide but holds.

Corin walked home the long way, past walls where squares hung that had always been plain and, tonight, looked like prayers. In his shop, he closed the door but not the latch. He sat at his own loom and put his hands to the shuttle.

He had not woven for himself in days. The lower edge of his square still bore the small gap where his own thread had been offered. He did not hide it. He wove above it.

Each pass felt less like proof and more like trust. He listened for the small sound—learned now, beloved—the sound a thread makes when it is taken gently by a hand he cannot see. When he heard it, he moved. When he did not, he waited.

The cloth grew—not with brilliance, not with mastery—but with obedience. The pattern was no longer something he forced; it was something he discovered. Sometimes he mistook his will for the Weaver's, and the shuttle clacked with the sharpness of pride. He stopped then, unpicked without shame, and began again. He was no less a craftsman for it; but he was more a son.

Near midnight, he set the shuttle down. He looked at the square—a little more than yesterday, a lifetime less than tomorrow—and felt the right tiredness. He whispered the words that had become the hinge of his days.

"Not mine."

From the Hall, far across the sleeping city, a low note seemed to answer. Perhaps it was only the wind. Perhaps it was only a memory. It was enough.

Corin dimmed the lamp and lay down. The new calling did not make him grand. It made him steady.

He slept with his hands open.

Epilogue

Years passed, though not so many that the scar in the Tapestry faded from memory. It remained visible, honored, the place where mothers brought their children to whisper, *See how the Weaver makes even wounds into beauty.* Some believed, some scoffed, but none could ignore it.

Corin's shop never grew large. It did not need to. People still came with frays and tangles, but they stayed longer than they once did. They learned that mending was not only for cloth but for the heart that pressed it forward. He never turned away the smallest request, nor did he pretend to be more than what he was—a threadsmith with hands open.

The council changed in time. The elder's strength waned, yet his staff passed not to the loudest voice but to one who had once brought only a widow's strand. Green Robe still bristled at slowness, but he sometimes carried scissors in his pocket, and though he denied it, people noticed he used them on himself before he used them on others. Gold Wire kept her ledger, but she left spaces in the margins now, as if even numbers needed room to breathe. The bearded councilor still loved statutes, but when he quoted them, his voice carried less thunder and more care.

As for Corin, he grew older, though not so old that his hands lost their steadiness. Apprentices came, not to master craft alone but to learn the posture of waiting. He taught them the phrase that had become the hinge of his life: *Not mine*. He did not make it a rule; he made it a practice.

One evening, as lamps were being lit along the street, a boy entered—no longer the child who once brought him a knot, but taller now, shoulders broadening, eyes bright. He carried a small square of his own weaving, plain and

uneven. “Master,” he said, half sheepish, half proud, “it is nothing special. But I want it to be the Weaver’s.”

Corin took it with both hands. The threads were crooked, the dyes uncertain. Yet as he turned it in the lamplight, he smiled. “Then it is more than special,” he said.

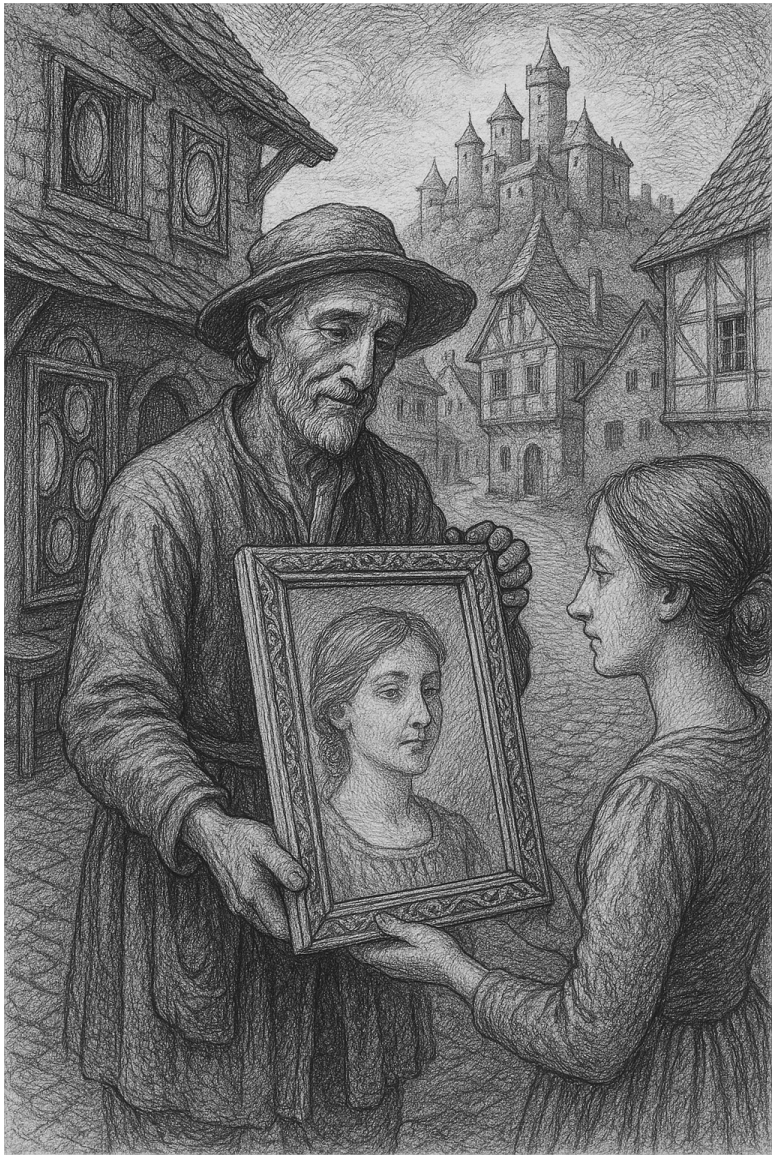
That night, when the boy had gone and the street had quieted, Corin stepped outside. The air was cool, the stars few but clear. He thought of the scar in the Hall, still shining, still teaching. He thought of the Loom’s Heart, unseen yet certain. He thought of the day his own thread would be pulled from his square entirely.

He did not fear it. He had heard the sound a thread makes when it is taken gently by a hand he cannot see. He trusted that sound would come again.

He lifted his palms to the night, open as ever.

“Not mine,” he whispered.

And the silence, vast and tender, seemed to receive it.



The Mirror Merchant

Prologue: The Craftsman's Secret

The little shop stood at the edge of the marketplace, tucked between a tanner's stall and a weaver's hall. Most who passed scarcely noticed it. Its shutters were plain, its sign weathered, and its owner — a quiet man with gray at his temples — rarely called out for trade. Yet those who entered never forgot.

For upon his shelves rested mirrors unlike any other. They did not gleam with polished silver nor flatter with smooth glass. These mirrors carried a depth, as though behind the pane stretched a window into some hidden place.

Travelers whispered that the craftsman's mirrors revealed not garments or faces, but the soul itself. A soldier claimed he had seen blood still staining his hands, though they were scrubbed clean. A merchant swore he glimpsed scales of greed weighing down his heart. And a child — innocent, wide-eyed — said she saw a light shining inside her, brighter than the morning sun.

The Mirror Merchant spoke little of such things. He would simply fit the frame, polish the glass, and slide the finished work across the counter. "It will show you what is already there," was all he ever said.

Some called it enchantment. Others, blasphemy. A few wondered if heaven itself had given him this gift. Yet one truth none could deny: whoever dared look into one of his mirrors left changed — though not always willing to admit it.

And so, the secret of the Mirror Merchant spread, carried on restless tongues, until at last it reached ears that would test him as never before.

Chapter 1: The Pilgrim's Purchase

When the pilgrim came, the day was heavy with dust and heat. His cloak hung tattered from his shoulders, and his sandals were little more than straps clinging to weary feet. Yet his eyes, though ringed with fatigue, carried a stubborn spark. He leaned upon a staff as he entered the little shop at the edge of the marketplace.

The Mirror Merchant looked up from his workbench, where he was polishing the rim of a frame carved with vines. He said nothing, only waited.

"I have walked long," the pilgrim rasped. "And I have prayed longer. But my heart feels clouded. They told me you fashion mirrors that show what truly dwells within a man. Is it so?"

The craftsman wiped his hands and studied the traveler. At length, he nodded. "It is so. But the sight is not always welcome."

The pilgrim managed a faint smile. "I do not need welcome illusions. Only truth, if God grants it."

The merchant fetched a smaller glass from a shelf — not ornate, but plain, framed in dark wood. He set it on the counter and slid it forward. "Then look."

The pilgrim braced himself and leaned in. At first, he saw only his own face: gaunt, windburned, the beard of many days unshorn. Then the surface deepened. The image shifted like ripples across water. He gasped.

His garments appeared blackened, not with dust but with an inner soot, clinging close and foul. His hands trembled, and in them he saw stains that no washing could remove. Yet

behind it all — faint, flickering — there pulsed a glow. It was not of himself, but of Another: a light that pressed close, longing to pierce the grime.

The pilgrim's eyes filled with tears. "So it is true. I am stained. Yet still there is… mercy?"

The merchant inclined his head. "What you see is what is. A soul marred, yet not forsaken."

The pilgrim pressed a hand to his chest. For a moment, he could scarcely breathe. Then he straightened, shoulders squared with new resolve. "I will take it," he said, his voice firm, though his eyes glistened.

The craftsman wrapped the mirror carefully in cloth. "Carry it with care. It will show you again and again the truth — but also the hope. Do not turn from either."

The pilgrim bowed low, clutching the bundle as though it were treasure. He stepped back into the street, the dust swirling around him, yet his gait seemed lighter than before.

And in the dimness of the shop, the Mirror Merchant returned to his work, a quiet knowing in his eyes. Every soul that dared look into truth was one step nearer to the Light.

Chapter 2: The Lady of Appearances

Late in the summer, when the market was full of perfume sellers and silk traders, a carriage halted before the Mirror Merchant's door. Out stepped a lady robed in finery, her veil scented with rosewater, her fingers glittering with rings. The people watched her pass as though she were a queen, though in truth, she was the wife of a minor noble.

She entered the little shop with a rustle of silk. Her eyes darted quickly about the shelves, narrowing at the plainness of the room. "So," she said at last, "you are the one they whisper of. They tell me you craft mirrors that do not lie."

The merchant set aside his tools. "I make what I am given to make."

Her laugh was light, but sharp at the edges. "Then fashion me one that shows the truth of my beauty. I am weary of polished silver and the flatteries of courtiers. I would see myself as I truly am — flawless."

The craftsman studied her for a long moment. "What you ask is costly. The mirror will not bend itself to your wish, nor to mine. It will reveal only what is."

"Then so be it," she said, sweeping a purse of coins onto the counter. "I shall pay any price."

The merchant chose a tall glass framed in ivory, its surface dark as still water. He turned it toward her. "Look, and see."

She lifted her chin, stepped close, and gazed.

At first, her lips curved in satisfaction. She saw her high cheekbones, painted brows, and hair coiled with pearls. But

then the surface deepened, and the smile froze upon her face. The eyes staring back were cold and hollow. The mouth twisted in disdain. Beneath her silks clung shadows — envy, bitterness, pride coiling like serpents about her form.

“No,” she whispered, shaking her head. “This is trickery. A false glass.”

“The mirror does not lie,” the craftsman said quietly. “It cannot.”

Her hands trembled, and anger surged to her cheeks. With a sudden cry, she seized the mirror and hurled it to the floor. The glass shattered, skittering across the planks like fleeing beetles.

“You dare insult me!” she cried. “I am radiant — all men say so!”

But even as she stormed from the shop, a hush fell outside. For in the shards that littered the threshold, the townsfolk glimpsed what she had seen — not loveliness, but ugliness of the soul.

The merchant stooped, gathering the pieces one by one. His face was grave, but not surprised. He set the fragments aside and swept the floor clean.

Not all who sought the truth could bear it.

Chapter 3: The Merchant Tested

The shattering of the ivory mirror did not pass quietly. By evening, the tale had spread across the marketplace: that the Mirror Merchant had insulted a noblewoman, that he conjured phantoms in glass, that he made mockery of the great.

Within days, two officers of the town watch arrived at his door. Their armor clinked as they entered, helmets gleaming beneath the shop's low beams.

“You are summoned,” one announced. “The council accuses you of deceit — planting illusions to shame your patrons. Some even call it sorcery.”

The merchant looked up from his workbench, calm as a man hearing the weather forecast. “I sell no illusions. My mirrors reveal only what is. If the truth shames, it is because the heart is not clean.”

“Enough riddles,” the other guard growled. “You will come and answer.”

So the merchant was brought before the town hall. Merchants and magistrates crowded the chamber, whispering among themselves. The noblewoman sat near the front, her face veiled, but her eyes glared like daggers.

A magistrate, draped in crimson robes, struck his staff for silence. “You are accused, craftsman, of trickery. Witnesses claim your mirrors distort, magnify, or fabricate. What have you to say?”

The merchant folded his hands. “My lords, I shape the glass, but the vision is not mine. Each man or woman sees what already dwells within. If darkness fills the soul, the

mirror shows darkness. If light dwells there, it shows light. I add nothing, nor do I take away."

Laughter rippled among the council. "So," one sneered, "you make yourself a prophet? Do you claim to peer into the secret chambers of the soul?"

"I claim nothing for myself," the merchant replied. "The mirror does only what it was given to do. Whether you believe it or not, the truth remains."

The council murmured, some shaking their heads, others exchanging uneasy glances. A few who had looked into his mirrors sat silent, unwilling to testify — for their own visions had cut too deep to share aloud.

At last, the magistrate leaned forward. "Craftsman, be warned. If your work is shown to cause unrest, you will answer for it. This town does not need disturbers of the peace."

The merchant bowed. "Truth does disturb. Yet it also heals. Time will tell which you prefer."

They dismissed him without a verdict, unwilling to condemn yet reluctant to approve. He returned to his shop in silence, the crowd's whispers trailing behind him.

And so the merchant was tested — not by proof of his craft, but by the people's willingness to face what the mirrors revealed.

Chapter 4: The Prince's Command

Autumn winds swept through the valley when the summons came. A herald in blue and silver livery arrived at the shop, his voice carrying across the marketplace.

"By decree of His Highness, Prince Dorien, the craftsman of mirrors is commanded to present himself at the royal court!"

The townsfolk stared. Some pitied him, some smirked, but all knew the prince by reputation: young, vain, and hungrier for praise than for bread. His court glittered with entertainments and flatterers, yet his temper was sharp as glass.

The merchant closed his shutters, donned a plain cloak, and followed the herald.

The palace blazed with light, its halls hung with banners and polished to a sheen. Courtiers gathered like jeweled birds, whispering behind jeweled hands as the craftsman was led before the throne.

Prince Dorien reclined on a gilded chair, his face smooth, his hair curled with care. His garments shimmered with thread-of-gold. A smile played on his lips, but his eyes were cold.

"So," he drawled, "this is the maker of fables. They say your mirrors see into the soul. They say no flaw escapes them. If this is true, you can surely fashion one for me."

The merchant bowed low. "My mirrors reveal truth, my lord. They do not flatter."

The prince's smile widened. "Then I shall command you to make me a flawless reflection. A mirror in which I may see myself as I truly am — perfect."

A hush fell across the hall. Even the courtiers, accustomed to his vanity, shifted uneasily.

The craftsman's gaze was steady. "Highness, what you ask is costly. Such a mirror will not show what you wish, but only what is. Are you prepared to see?"

Dorien's laugh rang out, sharp as crystal. "Prepared? I demand it! Make this mirror, and you shall be rewarded with gold beyond measure. Refuse, and you shall be cast from this city as a fraud."

The merchant inclined his head. "As you command. But remember, my lord: the mirror will take its price, whether you honor it or not."

For the first time, a flicker of unease crossed the prince's brow. But he waved it aside with a sweep of his jeweled hand. "Go then, craftsman. Fashion me this glass, and bring it to my hall within the fortnight. We shall see if your work is truth — or only trickery."

And with that decree, the Mirror Merchant departed the palace, his task set before him: to forge a mirror unlike any he had ever made.

Chapter 5: The Flawless Glass

The days that followed were restless in the town. Whispers filled the marketplace — some pitying the craftsman, others certain this task would finally expose him as a fraud. Yet behind the shutters of his little shop, the Mirror Merchant worked in silence.

He chose no ordinary glass, but one drawn from his hidden store — a pane clear as still water, deep as midnight. He framed it not with ivory nor gold, but with plain cedar, carved smooth and strong. Each night, he labored by candlelight, his hands steady though his eyes were weary.

At last, on the fourteenth day, the mirror was ready. Its surface shimmered, not with brilliance, but with a stillness that seemed almost alive. The merchant covered it with a dark cloth and carried it to the palace.

The court assembled, eager for spectacle. Prince Dorien sat high upon his gilded chair, courtiers fanning around him like peacocks, all eager to see their master glorified — or humiliated.

The merchant bowed and set the covered mirror upon a stand. “Here is the glass you commanded, Highness. But remember: it shows not what is wished, but what is.”

Dorien rose, his robes sweeping the floor. He approached with a smirk, casting a glance at his courtiers as if to say, *Watch me shine*. With a dramatic flourish, he pulled away the cloth and stood before the mirror.

At first, he smiled at the handsome face gazing back — the sculpted jaw, the clear skin, the eyes alight with youth. A murmur of approval rippled through the hall.

Then the surface deepened.

The smile faltered. The eyes in the glass grew hard, vacant. The face hollowed, as if drained of warmth. Around his figure coiled shadows — greed, cruelty, arrogance, twisting like dark vines. And behind it all: emptiness. A void where a soul should dwell, vast and echoing.

The prince staggered back, his breath sharp. "No… this cannot be!"

Gasps spread among the courtiers. Some turned away, unwilling to see. Others stared, wide-eyed, at the awful hollowness revealed in their lord.

"This is sorcery!" Dorien cried, pointing a trembling hand at the craftsman. "You have cursed the glass to shame me!"

The merchant's voice was calm. "I cursed nothing. The mirror does not lie. It cannot."

The prince's face darkened, rage flushing his cheeks. He struck the mirror with his jeweled fist, but the surface did not shatter. It only rippled, like water disturbed. And again it showed him — hollow, empty, devoured by pride.

Dorien recoiled, trembling, though his voice thundered. "Take him! Seize this charlatan!"

Guards surged forward. The merchant did not resist as they seized his arms. He only lifted his eyes to the prince and said, "You asked for truth. The mirror has given it. Whether you heed it or not is yours to decide."

The prince turned away, covering his face with a silken sleeve. But in the depths of the flawless glass, the hollowness remained, watching him.

Chapter 6: The Court Divided

After the prince's outburst, the hall was thick with murmurs. Some courtiers whispered that the craftsman was a devil in disguise, mocking their lord with dark enchantments. Others whispered still more quietly, glancing over their shoulders, that perhaps the mirror had spoken truly.

Each man and woman who had dared approach the merchant’s wares in secret remembered their own visions. And though none would confess aloud, the memory of what they had seen stirred unease in their hearts.

Prince Dorien, however, would allow no doubt. He stormed back to his throne, his fists clenched, his knuckles still raw from striking the unyielding glass.

“This fraud will be exposed!” he declared, his voice shaking with fury. “He weaves illusions to deceive us all, and for this he shall be punished.”

Yet in the days that followed, the court was restless. Some feared the craftsman’s mirrors, urging the prince to destroy them and be done. Others longed to test the glass themselves, craving assurance of their own beauty or virtue. A few, more sober, counseled caution: “What if the mirror *is* truth? Dare we fight against what it reveals?”

The prince brooded alone in his chambers. By day, he scoffed at the thought of the mirror, cursing the craftsman’s trickery. But by night, when torches flickered low, he could not drive the memory away. The hollow face haunted him — eyes like empty wells, shadows twisting behind. He would pace before his polished silver mirrors, but none gave him peace.

One evening, in a chamber hung with velvet, his closest advisor spoke quietly. “My lord, the court is divided. Some clamor for the craftsman’s death. Others beg to look into the flawless glass themselves. If you condemn him too swiftly, unrest may follow.”

Dorien’s jaw tightened. “Then let them whisper. I will not be mocked by a tradesman. Tomorrow, he shall stand trial before all the city. And I will see him broken.”

The advisor bowed, but his eyes flickered uneasily.

In the town below, rumors multiplied. Some said the craftsman would be executed. Others swore he was a prophet sent from heaven to unmask pride. Crowds gathered in the marketplace, waiting to see what the morrow would bring.

And in his little shop, the Mirror Merchant polished his tools in silence, knowing well what awaited him — yet without fear.

Chapter 7: The Merchant's Trial

The bell of the great hall tolled, summoning the city. From every quarter, the people came, crowding the square until no stone was bare. Guards lined the steps, their spears gleaming, as the Mirror Merchant was brought forth in chains.

Prince Dorien sat high upon the dais, clothed in crimson and gold. At his side stood magistrates and counselors, their faces grave but divided. Before them all stood the craftsman, plain in cloak and calm in bearing, as if he had walked there of his own accord.

The herald raised his voice. "This man is charged with deception, spreading unrest, and mocking his betters through false enchantments. Let any witness speak!"

At once, the noblewoman of silks stepped forward, her veil drawn tight. "I looked into his mirror," she cried, "and it showed me monstrous, twisted! Lies, nothing but lies! He seeks to shame the noble and exalt himself as judge of souls."

A murmur of agreement rose, but then faltered as another stepped forth — a weary merchant with lines of care etched on his brow. "I too looked," he said slowly. "And I saw greed upon me, weighing my scales. It was no lie. I knew it was true, though I wished it were not. And since that day, I have dealt more honestly. Judge as you will, but his glass did not deceive me."

The crowd stirred, voices clashing. Some shouted "Fraud!", others "Truth!"

Prince Dorien lifted a jeweled hand for silence. His gaze burned toward the prisoner. “What say you for yourself, craftsman? What trickery do you confess?”

The Mirror Merchant’s voice was steady, carrying over the square. “I confess no trickery. The mirrors are no more mine than the sunlight is the lamp’s. I shape the frame and polish the glass, but what is seen comes from within the one who looks. If it shames, it is because the heart is unclean. If it comforts, it is because mercy still burns there. The mirror does not lie.”

A hush fell. Some shifted uneasily, remembering what they had glimpsed.

Dorien’s face flushed. “Bold words from a deceiver! Shall we then crown you prophet? Or perhaps saint? No, you are a disturber of peace. And peace we must have.”

He turned to the council. “Let him be condemned.”

But before the magistrates could speak, a voice rose from the crowd — the pilgrim who had first bought a mirror. He stepped forward, clutching the small glass wrapped in cloth. “I looked, and I saw my stains. Yet I also saw light. This man does not deceive. He shows us what we dare not face. Will you destroy truth, simply because it is hard to bear?”

The words struck the crowd like a bell. Some nodded, others scowled, but none could dismiss them. The council wavered, whispering among themselves.

At last, the chief magistrate spoke. “We shall not condemn this man to death. Yet neither shall we honor him. Let him be held in custody until further judgment.”

Dorien's lips tightened, but he said nothing. He could not oppose the council outright. The guards led the merchant away, chains rattling, while the people whispered — divided still, but restless.

And in the prince's heart, fury boiled. He knew the mirror's vision haunted him, and no decree could banish it.

Chapter 8: The Prince in the Night

That night, the palace lay hushed, its corridors dim with torchlight, its courtiers gone to their chambers. Prince Dorien paced alone, sleep far from him. The image of the mirror gnawed at his mind — those hollow eyes, that dreadful emptiness. No silken comfort could soften it, no laughter at feasts could drown it.

At last, when the moon rode high, he rose from his bed and slipped through the silent halls. He carried no torch, for he knew the way. His steps led him to the chamber where the flawless glass, draped in heavy cloth, had been stored.

His hands trembled as he pulled the covering away. There it stood, still and waiting, its cedar frame plain but unyielding.

For a long while, he lingered at a distance. Then, with a breath that shook, he stepped forward and looked.

The surface deepened at once. His reflection wavered, and the hollowness returned — the same emptiness he had seen before. Yet this time it did not stop there. Shadows stirred and took form: scenes of his cruelty, faces he had scorned, the poor he had dismissed with contempt. Each image pierced him like a thorn.

He staggered, clutching the edge of the stand. “No… enough…”

But the mirror showed more. Beneath the emptiness flickered something else — faint, fragile, yet unmistakable. A hand, scarred yet strong, reaching toward him through the void. A mercy not his own, pressing in like dawn through shutters.

Tears sprang unbidden to his eyes. His knees bent. For a moment, he felt the weight of all his pride, and with it a strange yearning to cast it down.

Yet pride fought hard. “No,” he whispered, forcing himself upright. “I am a prince. I am a master here. I will not yield to a piece of glass!”

He seized the cloth and flung it back over the mirror. His chest heaved. He turned and fled the chamber, though the vision burned in his mind.

In his bed, he lay restless till morning, his pillow damp with tears he would not name.

And the flawless glass stood silent in the dark, its surface waiting.

Chapter 9: The Breaking

Morning brought no relief. The prince sat through councils and ceremonies, his face set in a mask of composure, yet the vision gnawed like fire within him. Wherever he turned, he saw again the hollow eyes, the scarred hand reaching through the void.

By nightfall, his torment had grown unbearable. He dismissed his attendants and strode alone to the chamber of the flawless mirror. The torches flared as he threw wide the doors, his breath coming fast.

“There will be an end to this,” he muttered. “I will not be haunted.”

He tore the cloth from the mirror and glared into its depths. Once more, the emptiness stared back, vast and echoing. Once more, the shadows revealed his cruelty, his pride, his scorn. And once more the faint image of mercy stretched toward him.

Something in him broke. With a cry — half rage, half despair — he seized a jeweled candlestick and struck the glass.

The sound rang through the chamber like thunder. The mirror shuddered, then shattered into a thousand shards. Fragments skittered across the floor, glittering like ice.

The prince staggered back, his hands bleeding from the blow. Blood dripped onto the shards, red staining silver. His chest heaved as he gasped, “There — it is finished. No more visions. No more lies.”

But even in ruin, the mirror was not silent. On the floor among the fragments, one shard remained whole. Its

surface glimmered faintly, and in it he saw not only his hollow self, but the same scarred hand reaching still — undiminished, unbroken.

Dorien stared, trembling. He snatched up the shard, hid it beneath his cloak, and pressed it to his breast. “No one must know,” he whispered. “No one must see.”

He stumbled back to his chamber, leaving a trail of blood upon the palace stones. The shards of the flawless glass lay scattered in the silence, glimmering in the torchlight like a thousand accusing eyes.

And so the prince broke the mirror — yet not the truth.

Chapter 10: The Price of Truth

The city awoke to news that the flawless mirror had been destroyed. Rumors spread like wildfire — some claimed the craftsman had confessed to sorcery and cursed his own work, others that the prince himself had shattered it in secret rage. None knew the truth, yet the whispers grew until the whole marketplace buzzed with them.

That morning, the Mirror Merchant was brought once more before the council. His chains clinked softly as he walked, but his step was steady. Prince Dorien sat in stern silence, his face pale, his hands wrapped in linen beneath his sleeves.

The chief magistrate rose. “Craftsman, your mirror is broken. The people clamor for judgment. What say you?”

The merchant lifted his eyes to the assembly. His voice was calm, yet carried like a bell.

“My lords and ladies, hear me. Glass may shatter, but truth does not. I told you before: the mirrors do not lie. They show the soul as it is — stained or clean, proud or humble. Some have looked and turned away in anger. Others have looked and found mercy. The choice is not in the glass, but in the heart that beholds it.”

A hush fell over the chamber.

He went on, his words steady and solemn. “You may break every mirror I have fashioned. You may cast me from this city, or bind me in chains. But the true Mirror is not of cedar or silver. It is the Word of the Living God. Whoever dares look into it shall see not only sin, but salvation. Not only emptiness, but the face of mercy.”

The council stirred uneasily. Some shifted with conviction, others frowned in disdain.

Prince Dorien leapt to his feet, his voice sharp. “Enough of this preaching! He is a danger to the peace. Let him be banished — let him vanish from this city and trouble us no more!”

The magistrates, unwilling to oppose their prince further, nodded gravely. “So be it. The craftsman is cast out. His shop is closed, his wares destroyed. Let none speak of him again.”

The guards led him away, but though his chains rattled, his countenance was serene, as one who had already been freed.

By sundown, the little shop stood empty, its shutters closed forever. Yet those who had once looked into his mirrors carried the memory still, some with bitterness, others with a strange, restless hope.

And in the prince’s chamber, hidden in a chest beneath silks and gold, lay a single shard of the flawless mirror — faintly gleaming, waiting.

Epilogue: The Shard

Years passed. The prince grew older, though he fought hard against the truth of it. His hair, once gleaming, was threaded with gray. His voice, once commanding, cracked in anger more than in strength. He filled his halls with ever more silks, perfumes, and flatterers — but the feasts rang hollow, and laughter curdled in his ears.

Yet always, hidden deep in his chamber, the shard remained. Wrapped in cloth, tucked beneath his treasures, it haunted him. At times he thought to throw it away, to cast it into the river or grind it to dust. But he never could. Something in it clung to him, though he hated it, though he feared it.

One winter night, when sickness laid him low and courtiers withdrew in silence, he found himself alone. His strength failed, his breath grew thin, and the weight of his years pressed heavily. He reached for the chest, trembling hands fumbling at the latch.

He drew out the shard.

By the dim firelight, it shimmered faintly, as if alive. He held it up and finally dared to look.

The hollow eyes stared back again — but now they were older and wearier, marked not only by pride but also by sorrow. He saw the trail of wasted years, the cruelty, the vanity, and the emptiness that had devoured him. Tears burned his eyes, and he could not look away.

And then — as before, yet brighter than ever — he saw it: the scarred hand, stretched toward him still. Not withdrawn, not weakened by the passing years, but strong, steady, unchanging.

For the first time in his life, Dorien whispered the words he had never spoken: “Mercy… for me.”

He fell to his knees, clutching the shard, weeping as though the hollowness was finally pouring out. The shard trembled in his hand, and for a moment, the gleam filled the chamber like dawn breaking through long-closed shutters.

When the servants found him at dawn, he was still kneeling, the shard clasped to his breast, his face streaked with tears. They whispered in awe, for though his body was frail, a strange peace rested upon him.

The shard was never seen again. Some say it vanished. Others that it became whole. But in the years to come, whispers spread once more — not of the prince’s vanity, but of the mercy he found at the last.

And of the Mirror Merchant, who had once offered truth to any who dared look.